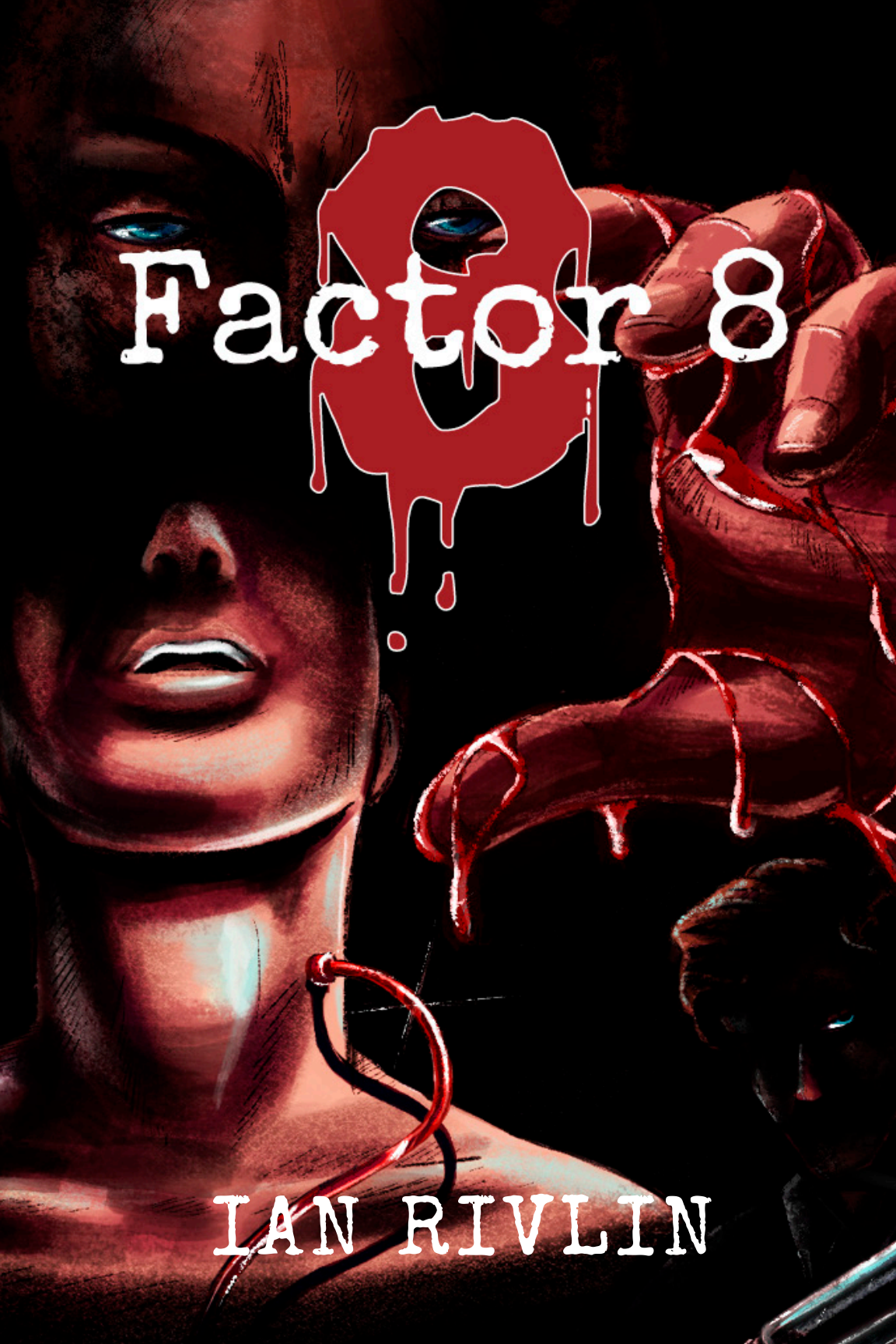




Factor 8

IAN RIVLIN

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(publisher logo)

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Book and Cover design by Designer

ISBN: 123456789

First Edition: Month 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DEDICATION

I wish I'd tackled a PhD instead of this book. It would have been far easier, cost less and taken only 3, not 18 years as this book has done.. (but wouldn't have been nearly as much fun).

My wife and two sons have always been incredibly supportive during the many rewrites and editing. I've thrown tantrums, become gloomy, self-aggrandizing so many times. I still don't know why Penny never walked out on me. Thankfully she didn't.

Penny, you are the love of my life.

Gratitude and thanks to Stephen Dando-Collins, who worked with me on this tome in the early days. We had some amazingly good laughs whilst we slaved into the early hours.

Brenda - you are my good friend and mentor and I can't thank you enough for all your wise words.

Andrew - you were the final link in the chain who enabled this book to (eventually) get written.

For everyone else I've forgotten to thank... Please accept my apologies. Put it down to my rapidly deteriorating brain, rather than bad manners.



PROLOGUE

Amanda Tate rose from the bed where the fat old man was sleeping. She tiptoed into the bathroom and spat repeatedly into the sink, then brushed her teeth. The man had paid her three times the usual fee to have anal sex and then finish off in her mouth. He had, for many years, fantasised about this and, at the ripe old age of 65, had realised his dreams for the sum of \$900. Amanda was happy, too. This was another \$900 to add to the thousands she'd accrued in the bank.

Only another \$6,650 to go, she thought to herself, then she'd have enough money for the swanky lawyer in Darwin to lodge the appeal and hopefully get her father out of jail. Amanda let out a deep sigh as she remembered the scene three years ago: Her father walking in on them together; her father breaking the boy's arms, cracking his skull, and knocking his teeth out. Amanda's boyfriend had been in an induced coma for two weeks, while Amanda's father had languished in the local jail, waiting to see if he would be facing a murder charge. The boy had survived but was never the same.

Amanda did what she could to help her father, but since attempted murder and grievous bodily harm is as egregious as any offence that exists—and because her father had previous criminal convictions for violence—he'd been jailed for ten years in a maximum-security prison. Had the judge known that Amanda's father had been having sex with his daughter for years, and the beating administered to the young man had been committed in a jealous rage, Amanda's father would have received double the sentence.

Although she had no clue today as she squirrelled away her cash, Amanda would be dead in a few days, murdered by a particularly cold and calculating serial killer. Just as most people are unaware of their ultimate fate, Amanda was blissfully oblivious to the catastrophic events that would unfold and the part she would be playing in an international criminal conspiracy.

The young prostitute sat on the toilet and expunged what she could of her client's passions. She would do anything a client asked, as long as payment reflected the degradation. She had yet to experience anything more inventive than her father's sexual requirements. Amanda was an abused daughter. To her, sexual deviancy didn't exist. Different men had different sexual requirements— simple as that.

When she was growing up, Amanda's father hadn't administered corporal punishment by the usual method of a smack on the bottom. Instead, he made her strip naked and raped her, vaginally and anally, for any misbehaviour. At the tender age of ten, she was the regular recipient of paternal penetrative intercourse, kept from her mother and anyone else's ears by her father threatening to expose her punishments—something that Amanda's father knew would deeply humiliate her. She was, of course, unaware that this was a bluff.

Amanda began to empathise and increasingly adore her powerful and abusive father. Just as the hostages of the 1973 *Norrmalmstorg* robbery developed Stockholm Syndrome and exhibited empathy and sympathy towards their captors, so did Amanda paradoxically develop a deep love for her father. This unholy liaison went on for years,

until Amanda was encouraged by her father to have sex with other men, so he could watch, masturbating in hiding. By now, Amanda was a classic example of alphamegamia—she only could get turned on and orgasm with much older men—but she thought having sex with the young man was what her father wanted, so she had done it for him.

Halfway through Amanda's lovemaking, her father had changed his mind. He had burst into the room and belted twenty shades of shit out of the young man. He had only stopped because of Amanda's screams—screams that alerted the neighbours to call the police and an ambulance.

As the police were taking the father into custody, Amanda launched herself at one of the police officers and bit part of his ear off, then while he was writhing in pain, she kicked him repeatedly in the groin. The other officer hit Amanda across the face, at which point Amanda's father lashed out, fracturing the second police officer's jaw.



Amanda and her father left the two badly injured officers lying on the ground and became fugitives for a few days. After they were arrested in a Queensland motel, Amanda's father was found guilty of attempted murder on Amanda's boyfriend and felonious grievous

bodily harm on the policeman, and Amanda was sent to a youth offenders' home, also for grievous bodily harm. Being surrounded by the most dysfunctional female members of society only consolidated and entrenched her antisocial behaviour. She learnt to use drugs, and drugs cost money. Prostitution had seemed the logical way to pay for her habit—a habit that would soon have catastrophic consequences for such a youthful but already worldly girl.

She finished her ablutions and crept back into the bedroom. The old man was lying on his back, snoring loudly, his mouth wide open. Amanda rummaged through his wallet and personal possessions, keeping one eye on the man in case he woke up suddenly. Having decided he was unlikely to miss the gold tie pin, she slipped it under the pillow. If the old man did notice it was gone, she'd look surprised, do a quick search, and simply say the pin must have dropped there accidentally. Clients rarely kicked up a fuss about that sort of thing. To do so would involve the police, and that was the last thing they wanted. In any event, most clients regarded the theft of occasional items as part of the game; besides, if they were sensible, they never brought items of great value into her room. Amanda slipped under the sheets and let her thoughts drift to the only real love of her life—her wonderful father.



CHAPTER ONE

Elizabeth Rivers was sure that James Bond had never been to Dorset Creek, yet the man standing on the doorstep of the small miner's cottage in Willis Street looked just like him. Elizabeth had loved all the Bonds, the latest one in particular, and this man had the same athletic build, lazy smile, and easy charm—qualities she was unlikely to encounter elsewhere in the small Northern Territory town of Dorset Creek, just four hours' drive south-west of Darwin. And his voice? Oozing with promise.

"Miss Rivers? Or is it Mrs?"

Elizabeth could feel herself blushing. "Miss. My partner Mike is at work."

The mystery man smiled, and his eyes filled with warmth. "Well, it was you I actually wanted to see."

"Me?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I have something for you." The stranger tapped a large black bag in his right hand. A dream man—and a gift, Elizabeth Rivers was not going to let her fantasy pass her by.

Puzzled, heart aflutter, she stepped aside with a smile and motioned him inside.

Mike Nicholls, Elizabeth Rivers' live-in boyfriend, scowled at his supervisor in his usual surly manner. He was dressed for the mines, ready to do a hard night's work in return for the not-insubstantial night rates.

"Well, I got the call from some fucker saying I was needed for the night shift. You're lucky I could make it. My truck's got a flat and I had to borrow the missus' car—damn frilly Hyundai Getz. Did you hear that? A Hyundai fuckin' Getz. Never thought I'd be seen dead in that piece of Korean shite. It's taken me fuckin' forty minutes to get here and it's going to take the same time back, what are you going to do about it? I reckon that's company time. So, are you gonna set the clock tickin' or what?" Mike Nicholls had a restricted vocabulary and regarded the word fuckin' in the same manner as a more educated person might regard a punctuation mark.

"Keep your shirt on, Mike—I dunno what's happened, 'cos I didn't call you. Maybe it was some other department. But yeah, it just so happens I could use you over in E Block. Sign in and I'll put you down for ten hours, okay? That's 6pm until 4am. That way you'll pick up double time as well."

Mike Nicholls snorted an acknowledgement and nodded. It wasn't as if he was missing anything of interest at home. The TV was on the blink again, and Liz was moody—PMT again, Mike reckoned. With an extra \$600 in his wallet, he would have a hell of a time down at the pub tomorrow—and that was just what he needed, a bit more excitement in his life.

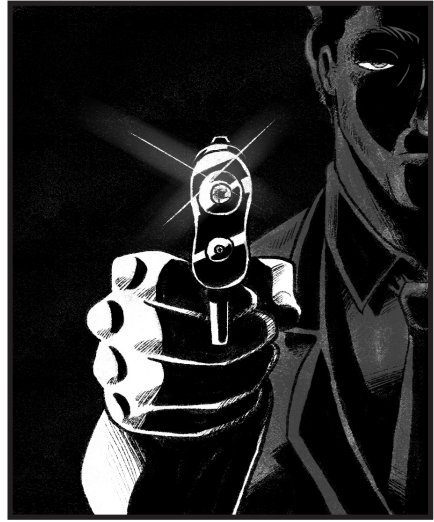
The Willis Street James Bond was tall and muscular, exuding masculinity and strength. His finely chiselled jaw was set on a handsome face, but it was his eyes that commanded Elizabeth's attention—pale blue eyes that both seemed to focus on infinity but also pierce through to her very soul. She couldn't help trembling with excitement.

"So, what have you got to show me?" she asked with a girlish smile.

He reached into his jacket with practised confidence and slowly withdrew a metal object, held firmly in his hand.

"That looks like a g—"

There was a *crack*, and pain radiated from a point in Elizabeth's chest. She looked down to see a small dart with red fibres at the end protruding from her right breast. Instinctively, her hand shot up to the dart and she tugged at the tufted end, but that only made the pain worse.



"Best not to pull. It has a barbed end." His carefully modulated voice was soothing as his hand gently went to her breast and carefully twisted the dart out.

She slumped into his arms, every voluntary muscle in her body unable to contract. Her eyes met his, puzzled to suddenly find that she was paralysed.

As if she weighed no more than a rag doll, he picked her up,

pulled the door shut behind him with his foot, and carried her to the couch.

Elizabeth Rivers' James Bond allowed himself a grim smile. He wasn't impressed easily, but his weapon was impressive—a CO₂-powered air pistol that could accurately place a dart to within two inches of its target at a distance of thirty feet. The dart itself was an engineering feat. It contained a fluid reservoir and a beautifully precision-made piston that, under inertia, forced the neurotoxin into the victim. The needle was tiny with a hole down the centre. Only half a second was needed for the entire dart's toxin to be delivered, and incredibly, could paralyse a large individual before all the contents had even been expelled. So much quicker and more effective than a Taser.

The toxin was derived from a marine cone shell. Developed in the USA for the military, and a very closely guarded secret, this toxin had fallen into the wrong hands for the sum of \$30 million. The disenchanted and financially depleted researcher at the US weapons research facility had envisioned a life of luxury with his newfound wealth but now resided 25,000 feet below the ocean's surface, close to the Marianas Trench, in the West Pacific Ocean. However, his tireless efforts and long, sleepless nights had not gone unappreciated. The weapon was ideal for the job in hand—silent, fast, and virtually 100% effective.

Elizabeth's perfect man worked quickly and methodically. Using the duct tape from his well-equipped medical bag, he bound her wrists and ankles together. He drew out a silver foil pack the size of a matchbox, ripped it open, removed an alcohol swab, and dabbed the left side of her neck with it, then took a ten-gauge Venflon intravenous catheter from the bag. Inside the catheter's plastic tubing

was a Teflon-coated steel trocar with a fine needle tip. A Luer friction lock capped the tube's other end.

With his customary precision, he inserted the catheter's needle into the soft tan skin of the woman's neck at an angle of forty degrees, and located the jugular vein. With the heart and head at the same level, the blood vessel had already dilated, so it was relatively easy to find and penetrate. Once the first trickle of blood through the needle backflow indicator provided visual confirmation that he'd hit his target, he adjusted the angle to a more acute fifteen degrees and advanced the needle further into the vein. When the catheter was far enough in for his liking, he retracted the needle through the plastic outer tube then slipped a temporary plastic injection plug over the lock at the end.



Leaving the catheter in place in the young woman's neck, he again reached into his bag and withdrew a length of plastic intravenous drip tube. This was followed by a transparent cylindrical fluid container and a khaki military field vacuum pump the size of a large coffee mug, its painted metal case scuffed by years of use. He attached the vacuum pump to one end of the empty plastic container and the IV tube to the other end. The opposite end of the tube went into the catheter's Luer lock. Using a small piece of white surgical tape snipped from a roll, he fastened the catheter in place. It was done, the sequence completed—vacuum pump, plastic container, IV tube, catheter, vein.

He placed the pump and container on the floor beside the couch and flicked the switch. The pump began to emit a low hum, and as he waited, the blood flow increased and the tubing coloured scarlet

along its full length. Once the flow was steady, he pulled himself to his feet. For a moment he stood looking down at her, studying his handiwork with satisfaction as Elizabeth Rivers' life blood flowed from her jugular and into the cold receptacle.

With night swiftly falling outside, the room was almost in darkness now. He walked to the window and straightened the blinds, then flicked on the light. A Toshiba laptop was open—CNN.com showed a picture of the US president standing at a rostrum, beaming. He tapped in a well-remembered page on YouTube and selected the Albinoni collection.



“You’ll enjoy this,” he said, as if sharing the music with a friend. His accent had slipped back into South African.

The slow, mournful strains of organs and strings filled the room as Albinoni’s “Adagio in G Major” filled the room. He turned the volume up, nodding to himself in approval of the mood the music created. Moving to the window, he turned off the air conditioner

so that its grinding hum did not compete with the music.

With approximately thirty minutes to wait before the job was done, the intruder sat on a nearby couch and started reading a new paperback on the life and times of selected Roman emperors. These were people who realised that ends *do* justify means—they never let trivialities like human suffering get in the way of more important imperatives. Roman emperors, especially Nero and Augustus, were men to be admired, men to be emulated, men to be respected. He caressed the pages and fantasised about himself as a feared and infamous despot.



CHAPTER TWO

“Come on, ya lazy bastards, drink up. We’ve got work to do.” Laurie Bastia, pimp, loan shark, bookmaker and general sleazebag, frowned disapprovingly at his two goons.

Laurie was of Italian stock, a second-generation, full-blooded Aussie. The Italian word *basta*, meaning “enough” in Italian, was the basis for Laurie’s surname, but “enough” was not in Bastia’s lexicon. For him life was about excess, as evinced by his triple chins, oversized gold chest medallion, and diamond-encrusted Rolex.

The two heavies he’d hired weren’t exactly the best money could buy. In fact, they were probably the worst money could buy.

Thinking aloud, Bastia continued, “Mike Fucking Nicholls has had long enough to pay his debts. I warned him what would happen if he didn’t pay up—I mean, what did he expect me to do, write him a letter?” The two heavies nodded in unison. Bastia went on, gaining confidence: “It’s time to teach the bastard a lesson. I have a reputation to maintain, don’t I?” They nodded again, and Bastia grinned. “So let’s get this right, you two. No fuck-ups. I don’t want a repeat of last month. Got it?”

The two big men nodded a third time while swilling the last of their beer. Goon number one was Zeke Tandy, a big, heavy man with a small brain—not that he needed much in the way of mental faculties for his regular job as a nightclub bouncer (or door supervisor, as he preferred to be called).



His colleague-in-arms, Mickey Gee, looked like someone who had walked in front of a distorted fairground mirror. Mickey was merely 5'6" tall, but his hands looked as if they could almost reach the floor. If Mickey were a dog, he would have been a pit bull on steroids and crack.

The odd trio had been drinking at this pub for almost an hour. It was a bit of a ritual for these three to load up on

alcohol prior to visiting loan delinquents. The two heavies enjoyed this because it was another excuse to imbibe alcohol. For Bastia, though, it was Dutch courage. The prospect of these visits always left him inwardly shaking with fear—not that he would ever let that show.

Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Proud Mary" was blaring in the background as the odd trio got up to leave. Tandy shouldered a man out of the way, shooting a menacing stare at him. The man, who had been just about to throw some darts, held his hands up.

"It's just a game, mate," the man said. Tandy gave him a next-time-I'll-break-both-your-arms look and swaggered out of the bar. He was not a man to be messed with, and he wanted everyone to know it.

The sudden swell of violins indicated the second movement of the Albinoni adagio. Once again, the unknown man knelt beside the woman. He had more work to do now. First, he turned the vacuum pump off. Then he removed a syringe and two glass vials filled with clear liquid from the bag. Jabbing the point of the needle through the larger bottle's rubber cap, he sucked out fifty millilitres of the contents. Then the needle went into the smaller vial's rubber top and he drew out five millilitres of the second fluid. Both liquids quickly blended in the syringe.

Holding the syringe up, he studied the contents. The first fluid was sterile water. The second was Pancuronium, a drug based on the fabled curare, used in surgical operations to paralyse muscles. Too much Pancuronium injected at once would cause the heart and lungs to stop. That was not a result the intruder wanted—he needed the young woman's heart to be fully operational. The amount now in the syringe was all that would be needed to render her paralysed from head to toe for up to an hour, although he'd have to administer it in several stages so that only her voluntary muscles were paralysed.

At a point one foot from the end of the catheter, there was a junction in the intravenous tube, like a siding on a railway track, with a rubber cap at the end. Just below the junction, he squeezed the IV tube and created a kink, temporarily stopping the flow of blood from the victim's jugular vein. Then he inserted the tip of the syringe into the rubber cap on the end of the siding. Delicately, he injected a third of the contents of the syringe into her bloodstream.

He waited patiently for the drug to take effect. With his right hand holding the kinked IV line and the syringe in place, he bent across her face and blew in her left eye. There was no corneal reflex—Elizabeth did not blink involuntarily as she would have otherwise done. The pancuronium was taking effect. He injected another third

of the drug into her, then paused again, looking into her eyes; they were fixed and staring.

She would be fully aware of what was going on around her, and probably would even feel a little pain from the catheter in her neck—but she wouldn't be able to move a muscle.

After easing the last of the dose into her bloodstream, he removed the syringe. Holding the IV line above her to assist the flow, he waited while the last of the diluted pancuronium circulated throughout Elizabeth's system. Thirty seconds should have been time enough, but he waited a full minute, just to be sure, and then let go of the kink in the IV line. The tubing straightened out and the vacuum pump turned back on. When he turned his attention to the intravenous line again, the hapless girl's blood was once more flowing through it and into the collection cylinder. Kneeling, expressionless, beside her, he eyed her chest with clinical interest, watching it rhythmically rising and falling, assuring himself that her breathing was regular and unaffected. Assured that everything was going to plan, he grinned—this young woman's own heart was efficiently pumping its blood out of her body while she laid there, powerless, unable to even flicker her eyelids.



The intruder stroked his victim's hair. "It's all right," he said in a low, soothing voice. "You won't feel a thing now."

The sombre music reached a crescendo. "Albinoni," he told her, standing up. "Often used at funerals. Isn't it beautiful?"

The procedure was nearly complete when a noise outside disturbed the quiet calm. Someone was rapping

impatiently on Elizabeth Rivers' front door. The knocking grew louder, more aggressive,.

"Open up in there, you bastard!" came a rasping voice. "I know you're in there—your ute's in the carport, and I can hear that bloody horrible music you got playing in there!"

The intruder's eyes flicked up from the page he was reading. He had not quite finished the chapter on Augustus Caesar's early life and was irritated at this intrusion. His eyes focused on the door as if he had suddenly developed X-ray vision.

The knocking continued. "Listen, mate, we're just here to get what you owe me. You did promise you'd have it for me last week. Come on ,Mike, cough up the dough. Do yourself a favour—open the door!"

Now the back door began to rattle too—the unexpected caller was not alone. Even so, the intruder was unperturbed. The doors were locked and he was well capable of handling himself. He glanced at Elizabeth Rivers as she lay deathly still on the couch. Her eyes were still open, courtesy of the pancuronium, although she would have lapsed into unconsciousness within about twenty minutes of the blood beginning to course from her body. But she was still alive—blood was still running through the plastic tubing and into the cylinder.

The man checked his watch as the pounding on the front door continued. Twenty-seven minutes had elapsed since the blood extraction had begun. It would be another five or possibly ten minutes before the woman's heart could be expected to finally give out and the blood flow cease. His inclination was to wait. The loud-mouths would tire and depart, and within fifteen minutes the intruder would be gone, spiriting the body of his victim away with him in a plastic body bag lined with menthol and camphor. Calmly he returned his attention to the book. Albinoni continued to play.

The knocking stopped, but the unexpected visitors were not going to be so easily put off.

“You little shit!” came the voice again. “Either you open up now, or we’re fuckin’-well comin’ in. And I’m not fuckin’ joking, Mike! I’m countin’ to ten, and then you’re in for it. We’re comin’ in.”

Scowling, the intruder lay the book aside.

“Fuck it, Nicholls!” yelled the voice. “I warned you!”

There was a pause, and the intruder heard the sound of muffled voices out front. The pause was terminated by the glass of the window on the room’s right exterior wall shattering inwards. Shards of glass splattered against the aluminium venetian blinds, then rained onto the wooden floor. A large, grimy hand reached through the opening and fumbled to find the window latch, knocking the closed venetians so they rattled and swayed.

The intruder moved quickly now. He had three objectives: get the blood that had been collected so far; get his equipment; and get out without being seen. It was as if he was suddenly in fast-forward mode. Leaping to his feet, he bent, switching off the vacuum pump.

Then, grabbing the intravenous tube, he yanked hard. The catheter shot out of the woman’s neck, spurting blood in an arc that reached all the way to the ceiling. No time to be tidy. Blood-filled tube, partially full blood collection cylinder, and vacuum pump were all rapidly stowed in the bag.



The hand at the window had found the latch and was opening the window. “Got it, Laurie,” called a nasal voice from outside the window.

The intruder grabbed up his bag and tried to close the lid. The end of the plastic cannula jutted out. He tried to stuff it into the bag,

but only succeeded in smearing blood on the surgical glove on his right hand. “*Kak!*” he cursed under his breath.

The venetian blinds were rattling and inclining into the room. Someone was trying to clamber in through the window.

Every second counted. He snapped the two brass catches shut then headed for the back door. As he reached the exit, he hesitated, taking a quick look round the room. His book was still on the coffee table and Albinoni was still playing, but the necessity to leave the house as quickly as possible overrode any temptation to retrieve the book or shut down the laptop.

Besides, the book could never be traced back to him and the music was on the victim’s own computer. No big deal. Now, just one imperative—leave immediately.

He strode into the kitchen, flicked off the light, then grasped the back-door key and twisted it to the right. The lock clicked and released, and he pulled the door open a fraction, looking out into the moonless night. All was charcoal gloom as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. From the side room came the sound of two heavy feet hitting the floor. A momentary stop as he reached into his pocket for a second dart gun, and he slipped out into the darkness, pulling the door closed behind him.

A voice lanced out of the darkness to his right. “And just where the hell do you think you’re going, mate?” it growled.

In one lithe movement, the intruder swung to face the owner of the voice. He saw a shape bearing down on him, heard footsteps on the concrete. He judged that his assailant was no more than ten feet from him—well within range. His arm rose, pointing the dart gun at the shape lunging towards him. With a twitch of his finger, the dart shot through the night air and hit the man in the pectoralis major tendon. He dropped like a stone at the intruder’s feet.

The intruder knelt down, yanked out the dart, took up his bag and, with quick but careful steps, crossed the yard to a slim gap in the high wooden fence. Ducking through the gap, he entered a narrow

laneway that ran between the houses, bordered by six-foot wooden fences.

At the end of the fence line, the intruder paused, looked, and listened. Bourke Street was deserted, without so much as a prowling cat moving around. A chocolate-brown 2009 Volkswagen Transporter van stood at the curb directly opposite. The nearest street lamp was out, allowing the dark vehicle to almost merge with the night.

With long strides he moved off again, the gravel of the footpath crunching beneath his rubber-soled feet. Halting beside the VW, he unlocked the side door and quietly slid the door back.

A large roll of carpet occupied the full length of the cargo compartment, ready to take a body, like Cleopatra for Caesar. Beside it was a rolled sleeping bag along with a cardboard box of provisions and a green canvas haversack. This was where the medical bag went. He stripped off the surgical gloves and donned another pair, these ones black leather, that had been carefully placed on the floor.

Pushing back the roll of carpet, he uncovered a trapdoor that had been cut in the ribbed metal floor and raised it to reveal a custom-built compartment. In went the haversack, fitting snugly beside several refrigerated stainless-steel flasks. He closed the trapdoor and allowed the carpet to fall back into place.

Quietly closing the van door, he moved around to the driver's door, unlocked it, then, grasping the steering wheel, hauled himself up and into the seat. Closing the door almost silently with a short, firm pull, he slotted the key into the ignition then started the engine. He was almost tempted to drive off without headlights, but he knew that might attract attention—the opposite of what he was trying to achieve. So, calmly, he switched on the lights, put the VW into gear, and then eased away from the curb. At a steady speed, the man in black drove away, headed to meet up with his confederates at a nearby grass airstrip.



CHAPTER THREE

Mickey Gee stood in front of the window and cast his gaze around the room. Bathed in the stark white light of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling, Mike Nicholls' living room looked like any other living room in any suburban home in this part of the world. A leather couch stood with its back to him. Spread around the room were two armchairs, a glass-topped coffee table, a wooden dining table with four chairs, a TV, a DVD player, and a Toshiba laptop playing a morbid classical tune. But no Mike Nicholls.

"No sign of the bastard, Laurie," Gee called over his shoulder.

"The little rat!" came Bastia's voice from outside the window. "He's probably hiding under the bed. Open up and let me in there!"

Gee began to move towards the door. Then something caught his eye—a pair of bare feet at the end of the couch. With a frown, Gee made his way to the front of the couch and looked down.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" The blood drained from the face of tough man Mickey Gee as he started down at the body. "Jesus!" he exclaimed again.



“What’s the holdup, Mickey?” Bastia shouted impatiently. “Open the fuckin’ door!”

Gee backed away from the couch then turned and all but ran to the door. He fumbled with the lock, taking three times as long to open it as he would have if he hadn’t just seen a dead woman.

Bastia came barging in, his treble chins flapping as he spoke. “What’s up with

you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“The silly prick’s gone and killed his missus!” Gee screeched.

“Are you shitting me?”

“Nicholls! He’s shot her or somethin’!” Gee pointed to the couch.

“Don’t be a dickhead!” Bastia waddled across the room to the couch. He froze as he stood over the young woman, first taking in her taped wrists and ankles, then looking at the waxy pallor of her skin. Her left eye still stared straight ahead, but her right eye had half closed. She looked very, very dead. “Fuckin’ hell!” Bastia’s hands went to his bald head, which was gleaming in the fluorescent light.

“She’s dead, ain’t she?” wailed Gee.

Bastia took a step back, looking anxiously around the room.

“I can’t think, Mickey. Turn that fuckin’ music off. Did you touch anything?”

Gee snapped the laptop shut, which immediately silenced Albinoni. He shook his head violently.

“Nothing, boss. Just the laptop.”

“Wipe it down, you fuckin’ idiot. Fingerprints. Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

Gee didn’t have to be told twice. After using his jacket sleeve to wipe the parts of the computer he’d touched, he ran out the door ahead of his employer. Bastia followed close behind, hesitating a moment before taking a grubby handkerchief from the pocket of his trousers to wipe the door handle he had grasped only half a minute before. He cast a last glance back into the room, lingering on the sight of Elizabeth River’s rigid body.

“Just my luck!” he cursed. “Just my fuckin’ luck!” Then he turned, and, leaving the door standing open, lumbered towards his silver 2012 Ford Fairlane sedan. Gee was already behind the wheel and starting the engine.

Out the back of the house, Zeke Tandy had regained consciousness. He’d only been affected for a short time, as the dart gun had been set up for a much smaller person. As he sat, head spinning, he realised that his right armpit and the right side of his chest were stinging. Convinced he had taken a bullet just below the shoulder, he clapped his left hand over the area where the dart had hit. He heard the Fairlane’s big V8 motor roar into life out the front. Dazed and terrified he might bleed to death, and fearful of being left behind, he struggled to his feet and loped around the side of the house, skirting the carport containing Mike Nicholls’ old ute, and barrelling down the cement drive. Still grasping his wound, he awkwardly hurdled the low wire gate.

Bastia was clambering into the front of the Fairlane. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“I’ve been shot, Laurie!” Tandy whimpered in shocked disbelief as he reached the car. “Some bastard shot me!”

“Jesus!” Gee exclaimed.



“Fuck. Zeke, get in!”

Tandy fumbled with the door handle, but his right hand was numb and he couldn't quite get it open.

“You bloody girl!” Bastia bellowed, looking around at his henchman with a ferocious glare. “What the fuck are you playin’ at?”

“I can't open it!” Tandy despaired, holding up his useless right hand.

“Use your other hand, you dickhead!”

Tandy dragged the door open. He threw himself in, sprawling full-length onto the plush velour back seat.

“For Christ's sake, boot it!” Bastia yelled to Gee.

Gee planted his foot on the accelerator. The Fairlane took off, its spinning wheels raising a cloud of red-brown dust that hung in the air. The car hurtled away down the street with the rear passenger door still hanging open and Zeke Tandy's size-fourteen feet dangling out into the night.

Inside the house, the laptop's orange sleep-mode light came on. At exactly the same time, Elizabeth Rivers' heart ceased beating.



CHAPTER FOUR

A somewhat fatigued Constable Steve Duggan had been driving along the Stuart Highway in his vintage American muscle car for more than three hours by the time he reached the turn-off and started along the Naranyup Highway. He was on his way back to Dorset Creek, having just enjoyed two days' rest and relaxation. After the turn-off, it'd be about another hour before he reached home. Night was settling in, and his dashboard clock flicked to 6:45 pm as he saw the first headlights in the far distance. The closer they came, the more the headlights tended to float up and down. The Naranyup Highway was no highway in the accepted sense—there was a sealed section down the centre just wide enough for a vehicle as large as a mining company truck, and either side of the bitumen, a broad gravel shoulder. The unwritten rule of this highway was that passing vehicles would slow and move to the side, placing their passenger side wheels in the gravel as they passed. The oncoming driver was obviously unaware of such an unwritten rule.

The approaching vehicle hurtled towards Duggan at high speed—way too fast for this particular road. Duggan took his foot

off the accelerator, braked, and began to rapidly decelerate. As the approaching lights bore down on him, he steered hard over from the sealed section of the highway, to give as much room as possible for the moron heading towards him.

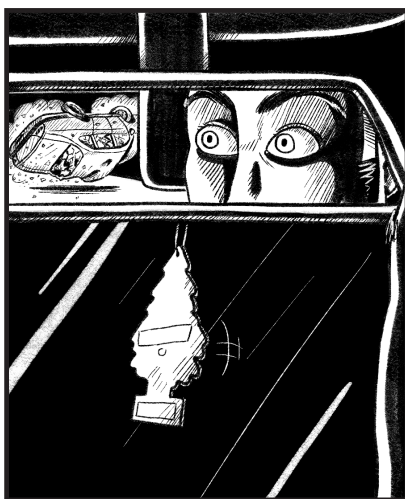
“Slow down, you stupid bastard!” Duggan cursed.

As the oncoming car closed in, the driver panicked, veering off the road to avoid a collision. All wheels hit the gravel, its slipstream rocking Duggan’s car. The silver Ford Fairlane flashed by, half on the bitumen, half in the gravel. Small stones spat from beneath the Fairlane’s wheels, cutting through the air like machine-gun bullets, ricocheting off Duggan’s windshield and rattling along the side panels of the Pontiac.

“Bastard!” Duggan yelled, furious at the thought of his precious Pontiac being marked by the flying stones. He flicked his eyes to the rear-view mirror. In the reflected blackness, the red tail-lights of the Fairlane stood out like fireflies in the night. As they receded, the lights seemed to draw closer together. Duggan realised the Fairlane’s tail was slewing to one side. The red lights suddenly glowed more intensely, and Duggan saw that the driver was doing the worst thing possible—slamming on the brakes, at speed, with his tail drifting. The Fairlane’s rear end became airborne.

As Duggan watched, the tail-lights shot up into the air. He clamped one foot on the brake pedal and the other on the clutch, his eyes glued to the mirror. As his Pontiac ground to a halt, Duggan saw the Fairlane flip end over end. The car was tumbling down the road like a child’s toy.

“Shit!” the young cop exclaimed. His heart beating fast, he threw his car into first gear and



hit the accelerator. With wheels spinning in the gravel, he did a noisy, sliding U-turn, getting to the wrecked Ford Fairlane within a few seconds. He expected to find the occupants dead, but miraculously none of them was seriously injured—just bruised and sporting a few lacerations. Duggan helped them out, one by one, and sat them by the side of the road, to nurse their injuries and their pride.

“What are we going to do, Boss?” Duggan could hear one of the men ask.

“I’ll see if that asshole will sell or rent us his car. I’ll make it worth his while. It looks an old piece of American shit—he’ll probably be thankful for me buying it. I reckon if I offer \$1,000 he’ll snatch my hand off.”

Grunting, Bastia got to his feet and limped the few metres to Steve Duggan, who was surveying the accident scene, and had not been at all impressed by what he had just heard.

“So, kid. We need a car—got a real important appointment that I have to keep in Darwin. I’d like to buy your old car. How about it?”

“Sorry, mate. Not for sale.”

“Ah, but you haven’t heard my offer yet. Look, just ‘cos I’m in a hurry and need transport, I’ll give you a grand for it—as is. No vehicle inspection, just straight cool cash. So whaddaya think? A grand. That’s gotta be the deal of the century.”

Duggan stared at Bastia, his jaw threatening to drop. Bastia grinned.

“A grand? A thousand dollars for this car? One lousy thousand dollars? Have you lost your mind?”



Bastia looked crestfallen. “Look, kid. I really have to get to Darwin. Okay, I guess I could go a little more—say \$1,200—but only if we do the deal right this minute.” He stuck out his hand, but Duggan just stared down at it.

“That rollover you’ve just had must have shaken up your brain a bit more than I thought, mate. That’s a 1963 Pontiac Tempest Le Mans Coupe Super Duty—with the 326 cubic-inch motor, Powershift transaxle, Positraction *and* independent rear suspension.” Duggan paused, trying to find the words to express his incredulity. “A service on the transmission on that car costs more than \$1,000. I’ve just come back from Darwin and had a modified Holley four-barrel carby fitted. The carby alone was \$3,000. You’re crazy, mate. Where have you been for the last forty years—the moon?”

Duggan could see that Bastia was struggling to take in words like Positraction, Super Duty, Transaxle, and Holley carby. For a few seconds, Bastia was nonplussed and speechless.



“So, how much do you want, then?”

“You’re not listening, mate. That car was owned by my father from new. He brought it over from America. I’ve worked on that car all my life. I’d rather cut my head off than sell it. But just in case you’re interested, one of these recently sold at auction for \$250,000. Even if you offered me that amount, the answer would still be no.”

Bastia was astonished. His mind was ticking over, considering the possibility of stealing the car. The thought was immediately dismissed. That corpse in Dorset Creek was enough hassle for one day. He wasn’t going to get this Pontiac Temptress Lemon Coop Super Duet, or whatever the hell it was. His hip and knee were starting to

pain him severely as he dragged himself back to the similarly injured goons.

“He ain’t going to sell the car.”

“Then I say we just whack him good and proper and take it.” Mickey Gee was having a rare lucid moment and—unusually, for him—exercising independent thought. The thought wasn’t great, but it was, at least, thought.

“Let me do the thinking, idiot. What are we going to do—kill him? Leave him here to rot? That’ll look good if we break down on the way back to Darwin in that old heap.” Bastia still hadn’t taken in the fact the Pontiac was automotive royalty. For the fifty years since it had been made, all the parts that were liable to fail or give trouble had been replaced by upgraded and infinitely better spare parts. The car was probably more reliable transport than any modern vehicle, albeit phenomenally thirsty, only managing about ten miles per gallon. The new stainless-steel 35-gallon fuel tank was a blessing and a curse (price-wise) at the filling station. Duggan had a standing joke that if he left the motor running while having the car filled up, the attendant would have to tap on his window and say, “Turn your engine off, you’re gaining on me.”

For the second time, Bastia limped back to Duggan.

“Hope I didn’t offend you with that offer, son. It’s just that we really have to get to Darwin. Any chance you might know of a place that’ll rent us a car—real quick, if possible?”

Duggan nodded his head reluctantly. “No offence taken, mate. I’ll see if Jack Clay’s garage in Dorset Creek can rent you a car. He often has an old banger available. Nothing flash, mind you, but it’s transport.”

“You’re a good kind lad—thanks.” Bastia beamed, unaware that this fake smile creaped Duggan out and only made him want to get this fat idiot sorted out and off his hands as soon as possible.



CHAPTER FIVE

Police Constable Wally Collins was contemplating nothing in particular when he received the call from Constable Gina Costas, who was manning the radio at the police station. It was close to the end of his shift, and here in the Northern Territory, that meant splashes of red, yellow, and purple hues across a dark-blue sky, leaving most of the small houses in sharply contrasting silhouette. Other than the occasional dog relieving itself against one of the carefully cultivated trees, nothing moved. This was the time of the day Collins waited for. Peace, tranquillity, and silence. He loved Dorset Creek and had never had the slightest desire to leave. It was his kind of place. He had no interest in promotion and no desire for anything other than this lifestyle to never change.

Relaxed as he was at the end of his day, the call from Gina Costas slightly surprised him. Nonetheless, he was happy to speak to her, especially as she was the only woman in town worth considering for a date, and Wally had been leading up to that for the past twelve months.

“Wally, a call has just come in from Mimi O’May over at Willis Street. She’s pretty upset. She reckons there has been a B&E and she’s worried about her neighbour’s house—the one that Elizabeth Rivers lives in.”

“I’m on it.”

Collins got back into his police car with a rapid change in mood, although the chances were high it was nothing more than a stolen iPhone.

It took him barely more than five minutes to cross from the east side to the west side of the neat little mining town encasing the 4,000 inhabitants in its protective womb. Retracing his route back through the high street, he passed the omnipresent American insignia of the multinational oil company Amroc, which was liberally promoted in pubs, banks, and retail stores. Driving to the outer suburbs, he conjured up Willis Street in his mind, trying to work out the best way to get there, just on the off chance the crims were still around. He touched the knife and the handcuffs clasped to his belt, then the Glock at his waist. Apart from the obligatory monthly target practice, the gun had never been fired. He wasn’t sure he’d even get a chance to use it—and, to be honest, he wasn’t too upset about that fact.

Sticking to procedure (the long line of Collins cops had always been good at procedure), he checked his watch after pulling in front of the house, aware of the chattering diesel engine invading the early evening vacuum of silence around him.

“Arrived at Willis Street, Gina. I’ll have a word with the complainant, then get back to you when I’ve checked the house out. Over.”

Mimi O’May had been watching from behind the lace curtains and was out in a flash, her small Filipino face creased with excitement.

“Ah yes, much noise, cars and...”

“What time was this, Mimi?” Collins asked, his own excitement mounting as Mimi filled him in with as much as she knew in her broken English.

“Mike Nicholls, he went out on shift about five, maybe quarter past five tonight, then later on much noise... three men, big, rough, one very fat and no hair, leave fast, tyres screech, yatter, yatter, yatter...”

Mimi was still talking as Collins began knocking loudly on the open door. After a moment he stepped in. “Anyone home? Hello! Anyone there?” When there was no answer, he walked into the living room, removing his broad-brimmed hat as he stepped inside.

Broken glass was strewn across the floor under a window—so the break and enter was right. But any notion that he was dealing with a run-of-the-mill television theft left him with a jolt when he took a few more steps inside. A pair of feet extended over the end of the couch.

“Jesus!” He stood for a moment, transfixed—first at the woman’s body, then at the grotesque distortion of her face, one eye open and one closed. Blood was evident across her neck. “Christ.” Looking up, he could see more blood on the ceiling. Fighting the queasy feeling in his stomach and the spinning in his head, he tossed his hat onto a chair. Aware that procedure dictated he should take note of details, he stared at the body carefully, noting the grey duct tape that had been used liberally across her mouth and to bind her wrists and feet.

Training and procedure now came to the fore once again. His heart beating fast, Collins donned a pair of latex gloves and reached for the bushman’s knife on his belt. With great care, he cut the tape and peeled it away, exposing the left wrist for a pulse. There was none. He considered checking the pulse at her neck, but decided against it—too much blood that he could potentially disturb. A quiver of excitement and dread coursed through him. His first dead body on duty. But she was still warm, so, just in case, he hurried back out to the patrol car.

“Serious situation here. It’s Elizabeth Rivers—I think she’s dead. Get the doctor and the ambulance over here straight away. And you’d better call Sergeant Bell. Tell him it looks like we’ve got a murder on our hands.”

“Are you kidding me, Wally? ‘Cos if you are, that’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking, Gina. For God’s sake, put Sergeant Bell on the line.”

Seconds later, there was a crackle as the extension phone at the station was picked up and Senior Sergeant Bell’s voice came through the microphone. “Murder? Are you serious?”

“She’s either dead or very nearly, Sergeant.”

Gina’s voice cut in. “Ambulance and doctor on their way, Wally. They’ll be with you as soon as possible.”

A wave of relief coursed through the young policeman. At least for the moment his job was done.

But Bell wasn’t done. “Now, Wally. What exactly did you find?”

“Broken window. Elizabeth Rivers duct-taped on the couch. Blood on her neck. The house is empty, but Mimi O’May next door saw a car sped away—my guess is that whoever did this was in that car. I’ll have another word with Mimi and see if she can remember what sort of car it was and exactly what time they took off. What else do you want me to do? Are you coming straight over?”

There was a moment’s hesitation before the reluctant answer came through. “No. I can’t get away just now—car crash on the Naranyup highway. Not sure yet whether the occupants will need an ambulance. I’ll send Gina around, though. Can you do the initial forensics, pictures, and fingerprints? I’ll call the CI squad at Darwin.” Bell paused. “They’re unlikely to get over until tomorrow though, so we need to secure the house. As soon as the doctor’s given the go-ahead, get the victim over to the morgue. Make sure no one tramples over the evidence. Check for footprints and that kind of stuff. It’s probably a burglary gone wrong.”

“Yeah, maybe, Sergeant.” Collins allowed his indecision to cloud his voice. “It sorta looks that way—but, see, there’s a neck wound—and—well, there’s even blood on the ceiling.” Bell didn’t reply, so he continued: “I’ll be very careful with the fingerprints and photos, Boss.”

Gathering up the rudimentary forensic kit from the car, Collins noticed Mimi O'May hovering at her doorway, curiosity clearly getting the better of her, and made use of the opportunity. "Mimi—tell me, what exactly happened?"

"Like I say, a lot of shouting. Three men. Break windows. A minute or two later, more shouting. Car drive away very fast, wheels making lot of noise. Big problem. I call police."

"Sure, but what sort of car, Mimi?"

"Big grey one, Fairlane. Like my husband's. Drive down road. Very fast—that way." She pointed north down Willis Street.

Seconds later, Collins was back on the microphone to Bell. "Boss, the suspects are headed north in a grey Fairlane, probably three of them."

"Wally, the car that crashed on the Naranyup is a silver Fairlane with three thugs in it. Looks like we've got them. Steve Duggan helped them after the crash and he's with them as we speak. Stay where you are—I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Bell called up Steve Duggan on the HF radio. "Tell me, Steve, can those three guys hear you?"

"No, boss, they're all down by the Fairlane. They're shaken up, but just a few cuts and bruises. They'll be okay."

"Listen, Steve, do they know you're a cop?"

Duggan paused. "No, not yet."

"Let's keep it that way. What'd you tell them you were going to do?"

"I said I'd call Jack Clay's garage and organise a rental car for them, but they aren't keen on going back to Dorset Creek. I thought I'd check with HQ, in case they were up to something."

"Good job, Steve. You've just done your career's biggest collar. Elizabeth Rivers has just been killed at her house. Those guys in the

Fairlane were seen racing away from the scene. Looks like you've just collared three killers within an hour of the murder. Do you have your gun with you?"

"Of course, Boss. It's in the glove box. Killed Liz Rivers? That's unbelievable. They look like stupid fucking idiots who couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery. They don't look like murderers—are you sure about this?"

"We're not sure of anything at the moment, but those three were seen racing away from the Rivers' house. Wally reckons Rivers was bound and gagged and is now deceased." Bell paused, thinking about what to do next. "Here's what I want you to do, Constable. Tell them you've organised a car for them in Dorset Creek, and bring them on back here to the police station. We'll have a little reception committee waiting."

As Duggan drove the Pontiac west along the Naranyup Highway with Bastia sitting beside him and Gee and Tandy in the back, another vehicle approached from the direction of Dorset Creek. This vehicle did all the right things—it slowed as the two cars converged and drove its outer wheels gently into the gravel.

Duggan noted that the passing vehicle was a dark-brown Volkswagen Transporter van with a male driver in the cab. The VW passed without incident and continued east along the highway towards the junction with the Stuart Highway. Soon, its tail-lights had disappeared from Duggan's rear-view mirror.

Having passed the blood container to the pilot, Wolf Kroeger was already driving to the next town. It was called Yarracoot, and was also a mining town with a population of about 4,000. It was more than an

hour's drive away. When he got there, the VW would be dumped and another vehicle acquired, and then he'd get on with business.



CHAPTER SIX

Only too keen to display his professionalism and get on with the job, Collins politely sent a reluctant Mimi away. Before he could return to the house, both the ambulance and Gina Costas arrived.

With a brief nod to Gina, Collins asked, “Where’s Dr Kell, for Christ’s sake?”

Gina shook her head. “He’s away, but Dr Delaney will be here shortly to do the examination.”

Waiting to accompany the policeman into the house, the two paramedics exchanged lewd grins. This obviously met with their approval.

The younger paramedic muttered a sideways remark to his companion. “Hey, I wouldn’t mind being examined by Dr Delaney.”

“Me too. But you’d have to be dead first to get her hands on you.”

Conscious of Gina’s discomfort, Collins quickly shot the paramedics a disapproving glance. “Come on, lads, a bit of respect here. I think the victim’s a goner, but best if you check. Careful what you touch, though. It looks like a murder.”

The paramedics ambled off, their conversation obviously still focused on what they would like to do with Dr Delaney. Within seconds they had returned and were on their way outside, ready to lean against the ambulance with a cigarette. There was little to do now until further directions were delivered by the doctor.

“Don’t know why Collins asked us to check if she was alive,” one of them smirked. “She’s as dead as Delaney’s libido.”

“Yeah, why’s Delaney so cold? Do you think she’s a lez?”

“Nah, I don’t reckon. I know for a fact she did a runner from the States over some bloke. Women get the same brush off. Anyway, just ‘cos she turned you down, doesn’t mean she’s a lez. Now, if I wanted, I’d be able to charm myself into her graces any time I liked.”

“Yeah, right. You with your beer gut and four kids—she’d be all over you like a rash. Man—what I wouldn’t give to rattle her bones. Whoever bags her gets the star prize.”

Aware that Collins was glaring at them, they toned down their remarks. “Wally, that girl in there is 100 per cent, 24 carat brown bread. Doesn’t look like she’s been dead long. I’d guess 60 minutes tops.”

Collins wrote this down as Gina said, “Just a thought—where’s her boyfriend?”

“Which boyfriend is this?”

“Mike Nicholls, the gambler.”

“A gambler, eh? Has he got form?”



"A bit, although I'm pretty sure he owes a lot of money to a bookie."

"What do you think, Gina? Could he be involved?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Don't know, Wally. Possibly. They've had a few domestics recently."

"Can you find out where he is? He can't be one of the three who just left—Mimi would have said."

"Nicholls does shift work at the mine. He might be on tonight. I'll ask Mimi if she knows." Gina grinned conspiratorially. "I sometimes think we should employ her at the station—more accurate than the internet."

Gina was just getting the update from the station when the elegant lines of the white Land Rover Evoque came into view and parked with precision outside the house. The door opened and Dr Julia Delaney slid out gracefully. There was a perceptible intake of breath from the two paramedics.

As if totally unaware of the dusty heat already settling on the day, Julia was dressed in impeccable white pants and a cream military-style shirt. She wore her tall, svelte frame with no apology. Although a graceful thirty-something, her face and figure indicated a youthful vigour that was accentuated by the clear blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair styled into an old-fashioned but becoming bob that curved in at her jawline.

Collins strode up to her. "Sorry to drag you out, Doc. Thanks for coming so quickly. It looks as if Elizabeth Rivers has been murdered."

A small nod of her head made her blonde hair glint in the street lighting. Her response was efficient, but sultry enough to make the paramedics quiver with desire. "I heard. I'll check for signs of life. Shouldn't be too long."

Completely unaware of the looks exchanged by the paramedics, she made her way inside the house, with Collins and the paramedics following.

“Okay if I hang around and watch?” he asked courteously, showing off his good manners to the paramedics.

“I’d be delighted, Wally. We’ll do it together.”

Her clear blue eyes rested on him momentarily, encouraging him to say, “Thank you, Doc. You’re always so helpful.”

The words had made him sound like a nervous, spotty teenager, which was how he felt in her presence. She was like a fine jewel—too far out of his league to even consider the thought of her as a girlfriend, but it was, nevertheless, a fantasy he could enjoy in the quiet of night. But this reverie came to an immediate halt as she surveyed the corpse and spoke.

“Wally, look at her chest. No movement, so no respiration. You don’t mind if we remove the tape from her mouth, do you?”

“Course not, Doc, but don’t put any fingerprints on the tape—the perp might have left some evidence.”

He noticed Julia’s lip twitch with slight amusement. He cringed—she had a good many years of experience behind her, and had not needed the caution. He should have remembered.

With Julia positioned in the far side of the room and the ambos behind her, taking more interest in her butt than in the body she was examining, she then took a small, round cosmetics mirror from her bag. Holding it just above the young woman’s mouth and nose for several seconds, she then checked it for any fog caused by exhaled breath. The glass was clear. She tried it again, just in case. Still nothing.

“Now we check for a pulse—nothing. Now we check the pupils. You can see the fixed stare in the eyes. Now, come on, Collins—gently touch the cornea.”

Collins did as told, fighting off a natural repugnance he did not wish to show in front of the well-practised doctor.

“Notice that the eyelid didn’t move—that’s called the corneal reflex—or should I say, a lack thereof. Look at the skin—it’s grey-white. That’s because there’s no blood running through it. Now we’ll press very hard on the base of a fingernail.” She pressed down, saying,

“If someone is in a mild coma, doing this would cause them to pull their finger back, but as you can see, nothing. We’ll check the back of the eye now.”

Julia took hold of an ophthalmoscope and peered into the eye. “I can see subtle cattle trucking—less than is usual, but still evident. It’s a sign that blood has stagnated in the retinal arteries—a sure sign of death.” She pulled back gently, a look of sadness on her face as she said, “Wally, there’s another test I’ll do. We need some cold water. Can you check in the refrigerator to see if there is some?”

Ignoring Gina, who had withdrawn to the doorway where she could watch from a distance, and pushing past the ambos, who had taken up lounging positions in the kitchen, Wally inspected the fridge and then came back with a jug of cold water. He watched, fascinated, as Julia drew up some of the water into a large syringe, put the tip into Elizabeth Rivers’ ear, and slowly expelled the contents.

“If I spray some cold water in the ear, it sets up convection currents in the balance mechanism. The eyes would flicker from side to side in a living person, even one in a deep coma, but, as you can see, there’s no response.” She gave her companion a quick glance before saying gently, “It hardly seems worthwhile, but we just have to check for a heartbeat.” As she pulled back the young girl’s T-shirt, a small frown crossed her face. There was a tiny puncture wound surrounded by a small bruise on Elizabeth’s right breast. “That’s interesting, Wally. See that? It looks a bit like a spider bite, but there’s just one lesion. Ever seen anything like this before?”

Collins looked closer. “Never, Doc.”

Taking a closer look and almost talking to herself, Julia added, “At first I thought it might have been a Taser mark, but there’s no burn. And just look how pale the body is—no dependent lividity. That’s caused from blood pooling at the lowest parts of the body, except here there is none. It looks like this girl’s lost a lot of blood. Have you checked the house? There should be a pool of blood somewhere.”

The young constable shook his head. “There isn’t, Dr Delaney. I’ve checked inside and outside. No blood anywhere, apart from what’s on the ceiling and that bit on the couch.”

Although they had both been conscious of it from the moment they had entered the room, they looked up again, noting the dark red scatter arching across the ceiling. Now it was Julia’s turn to nod. “All the same, Wally, this girl has lost blood—I’m sure of it. If it’s not here, where on earth did it go?”

Unable to answer and aware the examination was now finished, Collins said, “So, doctor, are you able to sign the life extinct form? If so, I’ll get her taken off to the morgue. Will you be doing the autopsy tonight or tomorrow?”

With a quick look at the gold watch on her slim wrist, Julia began to get up.

“I might as well get it done tonight, Wally. You can act as the witness, if you like. Can you call the coroner’s office and let them know what’s happened, and that I’ll do the autopsy? And notify the next-of-kin and all that.”

“I’ll be pleased to, Doc. What time should I meet you?”

“Well, I’ve got a few patients to see at the hospital first. Let’s schedule it for nine pm. It’ll make for a late night for you, but we should be done by midnight. Is that okay?”

Caught up with the event and the moment, the young policeman replied with a little more enthusiasm than may have been proper. “Sure! I’ve never seen a postmortem before. Don’t want to sound ghoulish, but I’m looking forward to it.”

In an attempt to lighten the moment, Julia said, “Well, after the first fifteen hundred, they get quite mundane.” Then, drawing a form from her medical bag, she picked up the book on Roman emperors and used it to lean on as she began to write out the life extinct certificate.

If Constable Collins had been a little more experienced and a little less in awe of the beautiful young woman, he would have

stopped her sitting on the chair that had been occupied by Elizabeth Rivers' murderer little more than an hour before, or using the book as a writing surface. Unfortunately, Collins didn't notice.

As Julia completed the form with her small, neat signature, she handed it to Collins.

"Can the ambulance boys have the body now, Doc?" Collins asked. Pausing for a final look down at the body, Julia agreed. All corpses look pale once the blood stops flowing through the veins and collects in various parts of the body, but Elizabeth Rivers was unusually pale. The extreme nature of the blanching of her skin triggered a memory that Julia had almost forgotten.

During her medical training, she had witnessed the effect of a botched backyard abortion on what had once been a very pretty girl of fifteen who had died from severe blood loss. Julia had never forgotten that death. At the time, Julia had thought that the horrendous internal injuries caused by the abortionist had left the young girl looking like a sacrificial lamb. During her years as a pathologist she had seen countless intact corpses, but few ever had such a pallor. That memory and chain of thought remained with Julia all that evening as she returned to the mundane hospital routine.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Steve Duggan's red Pontiac crossed the Joe Riley Bridge and cruised into Dorset Creek, past the guard box and boom gate installed years ago at the entrance of the town for use in the event of a security scare—Dorset Creek was a large producer of uranium yellow cake. The guard box was locked, the boom pointed permanently to the heavens. The long, low convertible cruised up Naranyup Street, past the Amroc filling station, the Ford/Mazda dealership, and the town administration building. Then they passed the Coronation and Columbia hotels, the post office, and the Sunshine Shopping Mall. Halfway through the town, the Pontiac drew up. There it stood, its V8 engine ticking over with a throaty burble.

"Where the fuck are we?" Laurie Bastia demanded, peering up the street. "Where's this bloke with the car to rent?" With a squeak of flesh on moist glass, he used his hand to clear a round space on the misted side window. His eyes came to rest on a low building beside them. A small, illuminated sign that read "Police" hung out the front of the building. Bastia exploded. "Fuckin' oath!"

As Bastia came to his realisation, Duggan had his fingers on the electric window buttons. The car's passenger window slid open with a hum.

A face appeared in the open window beside Bastia. "Well, well, well. If it isn't Laurie Bastia. Long time no see, Laurie."

"Bell!" Bastia spat as he recognised the owner of the face.

Bastia swung to face Duggan beside him. "You bloody little...!"

"Now then, Laurie, watch your language," Bell cautioned as he opened Bastia's door. "Let me formally introduce you two. Laurie Bastia, Darwin bookie and sleaze extraordinaire, meet Constable Stephen Duggan."

Bastia's face fell. "*Constable* Duggan? Oh, fuck!" He shook his head in disbelief and clapped his hands over his eyes. "Just my bloody luck! Just my bloody luck!"



The interview room was barren but for a table, four chairs, and a video camera on a tripod in the corner. The two cops pressed Bastia into a chair, then stood looking down at him.

"Come on, fellas, fair go, I didn't do nothin'," he whined. "We just came down to have a few drinks with some mates at the Columbia Hotel, that's all."

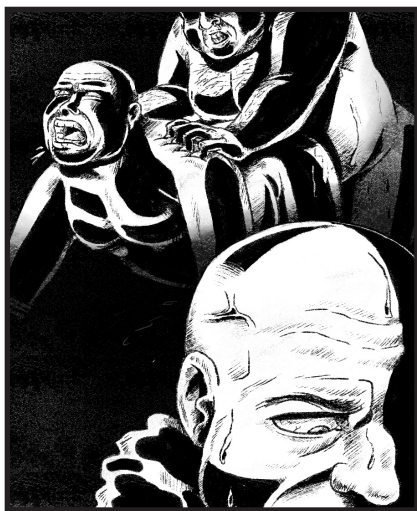
Bell ignored the request. "What were you doing at 8 Willis Street?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know no Willis Street. Me and a couple of friends were at the pub, having a few drinks. That's all. We had a bit of an accident on the highway."

"So, you travel four hours from Darwin to have a drink at a Dorset Creek bar, eh? Tell me, Laurie. Do I look like a stupid prick? You were seen fleeing the murder scene, you idiot. You broke into Elizabeth Rivers' house to extract money from Mike Nicholls. He wasn't in, so you tied up the woman and killed her, right?"

Bastia's face drained of all colour. "Honest, Mr Bell. She was dead when we got there. When we got into the house she was lying on the couch, taped up. We pissed off straight away. It'll be her boyfriend, Nicholls. He's gone and killed her. Honest, mate. That's not my scene." He paused, looking up at the cops. "Okay, so we were going to lean on Nicholls and maybe give him a bit of a touch-up—he owes me twenty grand, you see. His ute was in the driveway. He ran out the back door—shot Zeke as well."

"Shot Tandy, eh? You can do better than that, Laurie. Zeke hasn't been shot. Mike Nicholls wasn't at the house and you're a lying piece of festering shit. You're going down for life, Laurie—murder. Think of it—twenty years in Berrimah Prison. Think of all the people you've shit on. There'll be plenty of them there, just waiting to get their



hands on you. Waiting to widen the circle of their friends, if you get my drift. I'll make sure you get put in a cell with someone real good. Who knows, Laurie—maybe you'll get to like it after a few years."

Bastia tried to speak, but his mouth was so dry he couldn't get any words out. His heart was beating in overdrive, fears flashing through his mind. Eventually

he started blabbering, but what came out was just unintelligible gibberish.

“Laurie, just settle down a little. If you tell me the truth and confess, I’ll see if I can put a word in and get you a cushy job in the prison library, and a single cell. I’ll even get you on the protective custody program. It’s late and I want to get home to my wife and kids. If you ‘fess up here and now and write out a statement, I’ll help you out. Otherwise, I’ll throw you to the wolves.”

“Bell, I swear to God. She was dead when we got there. There was this horrible music playing, like you’d hear at a funeral parlour. I was banging at the front door, Mickey was covering the side, and Zeke was at the back. Mickey broke the window, saw the girl on the couch, and let me in. He shut the laptop down ‘cos the music was so loud. We got scared and got straight back into the car. Zeke dragged himself round to the front and said he’d been shot. He could barely move. We drove off as fast as we could. We never laid a finger on Rivers. Never had the chance to do anything. My receptionist called Mike Nicholls at midday, saying she had a gift for him. He said he wasn’t working that night, so we got to Dorset Creek at about 4:30 pm. I swear to Christ, it’s true.”

Bell was sufficiently experienced to know when a suspect was bullshitting, and although he detested Bastia—and all the Bastia clones in the Northern Territory—he thought Bastia was telling the truth.

“Bastia. Let’s say I buy your story. If I find you’ve been spinning me a load of lies, I’ll make sure that when you get to prison, every crim there is told you’ve been kiddy-fiddling. You



know what happens to paedos in jail, don't you? Lie once to me and you'll have twenty years of pain and misery."

"Bell—er, Mr Bell, sir. Look. God's my witness, we didn't so much as talk to the woman. The moment we saw what had happened, we left, sharpish. You know me. I've had a few loan delinquents slapped around a bit but this isn't my thing—it just isn't."

Bastia was on the point of breaking down. If it was an act, it was a very good one. Bell decided he'd grill the other two and see if the stories tied up.

"Laurie, have you ever had any medical training? Ever worked in a hospital?"

"Me? No. That's a laugh. The only time they'd have me in a hospital is as a specimen or a patient. Why?"

"Just wondered."

As Collins stood at the door of 8 Willis Street watching first the Evoque, then the ambulance, then the patrol car with a very withdrawn Gina at the wheel, disappear into the distance, he gave a cursory nod to Mimi O'May, who was still spying from behind the lace curtains, and made his way to the car. When he was sure no one was watching him, he made a call on his mobile to his contact at the American Mining Research and Oil Corporation—Amroc, as it was otherwise known.

Collins was a good police officer; his father had made sure of that. But when choosing between his two masters—the Northern Territory Police Service and Amroc—he was conscious that Amroc had to be kept happy and fully appraised of what was happening in what was essentially their town.



CHAPTER EIGHT

It was the house of the dead. The Dorset Creek mortuary was a single room that had been annexed to the original twenty-bed Dorset Creek hospital in 1962. The hospital itself had been completely remodelled by Amroc five years back, but there were so few deaths in Dorset Creek that the mortuary was much as it was in the 1960s. The size of a triple suburban garage, it was a sterile room that sparkled white, from ceramic tiled floor to white chipboard ceiling. There was a single window high in each of three walls with a humming air-conditioning unit in the middle window. The glass in the other two windows was painted over.

Collins had prepared for the evening with as much care as if he were going on a date. He was going to spend the last few hours of the day with the woman of his dreams, albeit in a mortuary. He had never been in a mortuary before, and as he entered the cool interior, he was torn between excitement and dread. Either way, this was going to be a hell of an experience. Once dressed in his white boiler suit, rubber boots, plastic goggles, and gauze masks, he joined the

Aboriginal wardsman Eddie Weatherall and Julia, both of whom were in similar attire.

The far end of the room was dominated by an elderly American-made stainless-steel refrigerated cabinet that could accommodate up to eight “clients” on sliding drawers at a constant cool temperature.

Twin-tube fluorescent lights dangled from the high ceiling at opposite ends of the room, while the hospital’s original operating-room light, replaced during remodelling and now something of an antique, was suspended in the middle of the mortuary, with a large metal microphone hanging beside it.

In the centre of the room, beneath the bulky OR light, stood the focus of all activities, a stainless steel dissection table. Tonight a naked corpse lay on it—that of 29-year-old Elizabeth Rivers, stark and vulnerable, feet together, arms by her side. Her skin was smooth, her breasts firm, her pubic hair thick.

Eddie had done all the early work. Humming “My Way”, he’d weighed and measured the corpse and taken the rectal temperature. Then he’d cut across Elizabeth Rivers’ skull just below the hairline with a noisy Desoutter electric plaster cutter, leaving the room reeking of an aroma reminiscent of a suburban barbecue on a hot summer’s day. He’d prised away the top of the skull with a chisel, then laid it upside down on a side table. The exposed brain gleamed a moist grey in the harsh, hot light. Next, he’d made incisions down the right and left side of the young woman’s chest, joining them below the ribs, with the skin parting like a cut plum. As he snipped through the ribs with stainless-steel bone cutters, they’d cracked like green tree branches. Once Eddie had prised back a flap of bone, skin and muscle, the young woman’s heart and lungs were exposed for the first time in their existence.

Collins’ nose twitched as it was assaulted by a variety of odours (burnt flesh, bone, and others) released from the corpse. They soon blended to create a single perfume that was faintly sweet and not altogether unpleasant.

“So, the bookmaker and his cohorts say she was already dead when they found her?” said Julia as she watched Eddie. “Do you believe them, Wally?”

“Too early to say, Doc,” the young policeman replied, with a newfound air of authority. “One of them—Tandy—keeps asking for a doctor, by the way.”

“Is he hurt?” Julia asked.

“Looks fine to me. Reckons someone shot him, but he’s dreaming. They all had a few cuts and bruises, but nothing a Band-Aid couldn’t fix. I said you’d see him later. If that’s all right by you, Doc?”

“Okay, I’ll look in on them,” Julia confirmed. Then she went to work, methodically, dispassionately.

Julia was beyond seeing anything more than tissue, bone, and fluid. In her years at the Boston pathology lab, alone she had dealt with corpses—or segments from corpses—representing at least three thousand deceased human beings. More than enough to deaden the sensitivities.

Turning on the overhead microphone, she began a running commentary on the autopsy that was recorded on a wall-mounted digital recorder. She began with the date, time, and place, then details of those present, followed by the identity, age, sex, and weight of the deceased and circumstances of her death. She noted the onset of rigor mortis in the neck and shoulders, and from the rectal temperature estimated time of death as approximately three hours earlier. She logged the neck wound and dart puncture mark. The body was weighed and measured, and the skin was carefully examined from head to toe—including the scalp.

Laying aside the probe, she lifted the woman’s shoulder. Nodding to herself, she stopped the recorder. “There’s very little livor mortis

present. Look, hardly any reddening of the shoulders or buttocks as you would expect.” She lifted the left buttock for them both to see.

“What does that mean?” Collins asked, sounding fascinated.

“It suggests there was very little blood in the body to create livor mortis. Curious, don’t you think?”

Julia continued, severing the brain from the spinal chord, then, with Eddie’s help, lifting it from the skull. She weighed the brain on a set of Avery scales, then cut thin slices from it on a chopping block, like slicing ham for sandwiches. “Not much blood around,” she commented. “And that’s unusual, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, I guess,” Collins seemed keen to participate. “Unless she died of fright.”



“I don’t think so,” Julia said with a faint smile as she inserted the tip of a scalpel into the cornea of the right eye and deftly removed the lens.

“So, what do you reckon, Doc?” Eddie was a man of few words and few skills of his own, but Julia felt like he trusted her opinion—he’d seen enough of her work to know she was what sort of doctor she was.

Julia lowered her face mask. “Okay, here’s what we have. There is very little blood in the brain. There’s reduced blood in the retinal vessels. I can only offer one explanation—this woman has lost an enormous amount of blood. Several pints at least. Bear in mind that when we take blood at the blood bank we take less than a pint at a time. The loss of several pints is going to bring on irreversible shock. In medical language, death from severe blood loss is called

‘exsanguination’. I’ll have to check the liver, kidneys, and lungs, but...” Her voice drifted off as she shifted her focus to the activity ahead as she proceeded to slit the skin down to the jugular vein, peeled it back, then probed the hole in the vein. “There you go, gentlemen, there’s the needle track,” she announced. “And by the size the hole dilates up to, I’d say a wide-bore cannula was inserted into the vessel.”

“A what, Doc?” asked Collins.

“A large tube.” She opened up the jugular, then smiled. “Ahah! Will you look at that. The tip of the needle went in here, and the needle slightly damaged the surface on the other side.” Julia felt like an archaeologist who had found the builder’s signature inside an Egyptian tomb. “This woman has had a venesection needle inserted here. The person putting it in has pushed too hard; the point almost went through the other side. Looks like it was then withdrawn slightly and turned 90 degrees to travel down the length of the vein.”

“Couldn’t that have happened in a hospital sometime?” Collins chimed in.

Julia shook her head. “No way. This is recent. I mean, just hours old. The blood around the puncture on the outside of the neck was fresh. Insertion of the cannula took place shortly before she died. Now, I’m speculating here, but it’s possible she lost a significant amount of blood via the cannula.”

“Could she have just had an internal haemorrhage?”

Julia smiled to herself, not wanting to embarrass the man. He’d clearly been watching a few too many TV thrillers. “If she’d had an internal haemorrhage, the organs would be awash with blood. There is no blood. That’s the whole point. Look at her—plenty of weight on her. Strong physique. She was no weakling. She would have had her full eight pints. And I would guess that she’s lost at least four or five.”

Collins raised his eyebrows. “That much? Jeez.”

“Sure. Yes.” Julia continued, “This track in the neck looks highly suspicious to me. The jugular is one of the body’s two most efficient sources for blood-taking.”

“Blood-taking?” Collins questioned. “Do you reckon someone actually took her blood, Doc? That’s kinda creepy.”

“Well, it didn’t just evaporate.”

At that moment the door opened and Constable Gina Costas entered the room bearing four steaming cups of coffee on a plastic tray. “Coffee, anyone?”

“Gina, you’re a life saver!” Julia beamed.

“How’s it all going?” Gina asked, clearly trying not to look at the body.

“Slowly,” Collins advised, muffling a yawn.

“Find out how she died?”

“Not yet, but the doc is doing a thorough job and coming up with some pretty interesting theories,” Eddie said with a look of approval at Julia.

A telephone began to ring in the corridor outside. “I’ll get it,” Gina volunteered.

Julia sipped at the coffee. The other two joined her, all in contemplative silence.

When Gina returned, she had a smile on her face. “Hey, guess what? Steve Duggan just had a friendly little chat with Mike Nicholls,” she said. “He went back to Willis Street.”

Collins nodded, suddenly a policeman again. “Did Nicholls say where he’s been?”

“He said he got a call to go out to the mine to fill in an extra shift but when he got there it turned out the call was a hoax. They were short-staffed and gave him some work anyway. Tom Bell called the mine and found out he was there. Got him to drive back.” Gina shrugged. “Steve reckoned he sounded like he’s telling the truth, which would mean he was away at the mine when Beth died. All the same, he’s a gambler and moves in shifty circles. Maybe he got someone to whack Beth?”

“He sure is one prize idiot,” said Collins. He glanced at Julia. “Mike Nicholls has three weaknesses—horses, cards, and every other form of gambling known to man.”

“Well, Sergeant Bell will give him the once over...” Gina said with a wry smile.



After she'd finished her coffee, Julia worked on. She removed the heart and lungs next. The heart was in good condition, with no sign of a coronary artery problem. Then she sliced the lungs into sections. Normally the spongy, rubbery lung tissue would ooze blood, but this time there was very little. This was highly irregular, as she pointed out to Bell and Collins. Recording that both

the heart and lungs were normal in all other respects, she moved on to the liver.

With Eddie's help she was gently applying traction to the liver with a steel retractor when suddenly a green, foul-smelling liquid burst out of a balloon-shaped bag beneath the liver, spraying all over her. “Bummer!” she exclaimed, pulling back.

“What've you done, Doc?” Collins asked, screwing up his face at the foul odour that now filled the room.

“Just burst the gall bladder,” she explained. She crossed the room and washed her face and gloves at one of the sinks to remove the putrid bile, then took fresh goggles and face mask and returned to the corpse.

Removing the liver, she noted that all seemed normal with the structure, and there were no signs of haemorrhage or metastatic

disease. But she could see one very obvious abnormality: the liver's intense pallor, another sign of acute blood loss. "This suggests pre-mortem hypovolaemia," she remarked into the microphone, then shut the recorder down, thinking about tests she had conducted during her pathology lab days. "There's one sure way to confirm she died from loss of blood," she said.

"And what's that?" Collins asked.

"I'll remove a kidney," she replied. "It'll take a while, but it should be worth the effort." She began by making a long, deep incision down the side of the body, from the mid-chest region to the hip. Rib retractors went in. As she wound wing nuts to expand them, a rib splintered and broke with a crunch. "Sorry, Elizabeth," Julia mumbled.

"What was that, Doc?" Collins asked.

Julia shook her head. "That was a tired doctor putting on a little too much pressure," she confessed. She reset the position of the retractor and continued. Eventually she emerged with a large oval object, with what looked like a long piece of white string attached. "The left kidney," she announced. She worked on in silence, measuring and weighing the kidney before slicing off a section she then put in a vacuum flask containing liquid nitrogen. It was soon bubbling and boiling.

"So, what are you doing now, Doc?" Collins asked with a frown.

"Freezing a sample of tissue to make what's called a frozen section." Once the piece of kidney was frozen solid, she placed it in a black contraption that looked like a sewing machine and turned a handle, producing a thin, frozen slice of kidney she laid on a glass slide. She added several liquids to the slice in sequence, leaving the sample a pale mauve colour. Meanwhile, Eddie had brought out a near-new microscope and set it up on a bench.

"Amroc gave this microscope to the hospital board earlier this year," Julia explained. "Very sophisticated for a small town hospital. But good ol' Amroc tends to spoil us with the best equipment. It

makes my job much easier—I don't have to send away for results." She peered into the lens for what seemed an eternity. "We have lift-off," Julia murmured with weary satisfaction, standing back from the microscope. "Acute tubular necrosis," she pronounced.

"And that means?" Collins asked.

"When the kidney is starved of blood, the basement membrane of the renal tubules dies. Then the body is committed to irreversible shock. Once that happened, Elizabeth Rivers' fate was sealed. This woman died as a result of acute blood loss. Exsanguination. I guarantee it."

"Is that what's going on the death certificate?" Eddie asked.

"Correct. Having excluded natural causes, and with no indication that Elizabeth Rivers was responsible for her own blood loss, we can safely say that a person or persons unknown extracted her blood."

Collins was left looking and feeling a little uncomfortable. "So, just for the record, that was 'ex-sangu-ation', eh? Well, I, er, s'pose I'll see you tomorrow, Doc."

She nodded. "Good night, Wally."

Ten minutes later, Julia and Eddie had cleaned up, removed their boiler suits and boots in the changing room next door, and left the mortuary. With a final thanks to Eddie, and with great effort, Julia made her way to her office on the opposite side of the hospital. Unlocking the office door, she turned on the lights then sagged onto her desk chair. Yawning wide, she opened her top drawer and searched through it, becoming increasingly irritated, until she found what she was looking for at the very back. Laying a pristine death certificate on her blotter, she took out her fountain pen and paused to compose her thoughts.

"Julia?"

The voice, coming out of the blue, startled her so much that she involuntarily shook a blob of blue ink onto the death certificate. She looked up.

“Howard? You scared the living daylights out of me. What are you doing here?”

Dr Howard Kell stood in her office doorway, wearing a tuxedo and unravelled bow tie. Julia’s boss was sixty-three, fat, with metal-rimmed glasses too small for his large, double-chinned face. He suffered from the kind of baldness that looked like a lawnmower had run over his scalp from brow to crown. He’d done his medical training at Leeds University and worked for a decade at Yorkshire’s Killingbeck Hospital before being attracted by Amroc’s fat pay packets. Julia found him a perfectly adequate doctor, but an overbearing boss. More than once he had stepped in and taken over her patients, and he nearly always reserved the major procedures for himself.

“I’ve just flown back from Alice Springs in a chartered aircraft,” he began. “I’m tired, hungry, and short on patience. Now, you did an autopsy on an Elizabeth Rivers tonight.” He crossed over to stand before her desk.

“Yes? Why did you fly back?” she asked, frowning. “What about the dinner?”

He ignored her question. “You haven’t completed the death certificate yet?” He stood looking down at her, creases in his brow.

“No. I was just about to.”

“What was your finding?”

“Death from shock, as a result of acute blood loss. She haemorrhaged to death. But it was no ordinary haemorrhage. It was a weird one, Howard...”

“She died as a result of cardiac arrest,” he proclaimed.

“Excuse me?” Julia looked at him as if she had imagined his last statement. “I just said she died from acute blood loss.”

“And I said she died as a result of cardiac arrest. I want you to put on the death certificate that the cause of death was profound bradycardia. The stress of being trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey brought it on.”

Dr Delaney's hackles rose, and she narrowed her eyes at Kell. "How do you know so much about the way Elizabeth Rivers died?"

"I've been given a thorough background on the case."

"Not by any doctor."

"I don't want any arguments, Julia. I have no doubts that Elizabeth Rivers died as the result of foul play. But not in the way you're suggesting."

"But—the evidence!"

"Just do as you're told, Julia. I'm too tired to argue with you. I should have done the autopsy myself. I thought you would have the skills to come up with a simple, straightforward, and *accurate* finding."

"Howard, I found what I found!"

"Listen, young woman—I have to answer to the Health Department and Amroc head office. I have no desire to become a laughing stock just because my junior doctor has seen too many vampire movies. So write what I tell you."

Realising now that Kell was perfectly serious and wouldn't be swayed, she glared up at him, folding her arms. "You know I can't do that. I conducted the post mortem examination, and I intend on writing what I found. Amroc's behind this, right? They don't want adverse publicity. They dragged you back and told you what to say, didn't they? They only have to snap their fingers and you jump."

"Utter rubbish!" he retorted. "Are you going to do as I instruct? You realise what's going to happen if you don't follow my orders? I swear, I'll suspend you."

"You wouldn't dare!"

Kell's face flushed red. "I'll damn well write it myself!"

"You can't do that. You didn't conduct the autopsy."

"Then give me a finding of profound bradycardia. I expect to find it on my desk in the morning. Goodnight, Dr Delaney." He spun on his heel and strode away.

She watched him go in exhausted disbelief, feeling like an admonished school child. She could hear Kell's footsteps receding away down the corridor; then, silence—the deathly, hollow stillness that envelopes the early hours of the morning.

She sat there, looking at the empty doorway, with thoughts careering through her mind. Julia Delaney had never allowed herself to be bullied by anyone—not by kids at school, not by her father, not by her med-school lecturers, and not by her various bosses in all parts of the world. Just because Kell wanted a “tidy” autopsy result didn't mean he was going to get one.

Mouth set in a grim line, she lowered pen to paper and completed the death certificate, writing *Deliberate exsanguination* in big, bold letters.



CHAPTER NINE

“**W**hat’s that smell in this room? Didn’t you notice it, Brick? Didn’t you notice a powerful and obnoxious odour of mendacity in this room? There ain’t nothin’ more powerful than the odour of mendacity... You can smell it. It smells like death.”

Big Daddy’s grating Southern drawl echoed across the auditorium. The accent was perfect Tennessean, his delivery powerful and believable, giving total authenticity to the difficult dramatic role that so many had attempted yet couldn’t pull off.

Big Daddy was just about to launch into the next dialogue when a young police constable burst into the auditorium.

“I’m looking for Superintendent Vickers. Has anyone seen him? It’s urgent.”

Big Daddy turned to the young constable.

“What’s up, son?” The Tennessean drawl was gone, replaced by a soft, yet unmistakable Australian accent.

"I need to speak to Superintendent Vickers. The duty sergeant said he'd be here. I've tried calling his mobile, but no answer, and we don't have the landline number for this place. Any idea where he is?"

"You're looking at him."

"Superintendent Vickers? Is that you?"

Superintendent Frank Vickers gently pulled free the latex nose and double chin prosthesis, leaving strands of spirit gum and rubber behind.

"I'm off duty, Constable. There's a play on tomorrow night and this is dress rehearsals. You'll have to contact Superintendent Chalmers—he's supposed to be minding the shop for the next three days."

"He's taken ill, sir. There's been a murder in Dorset Creek—and it's a weird one. A woman taped up and killed in her own living room. The assistant police commissioner wants you to sort it out. Sorry, sir."

"For Christ's sake. What about tomorrow night's performance?"

"Sir, the commissioner was insistent. He tried to get someone else to cover for you, but no one was available. Do you need a lift to headquarters? I've got the car right outside."

"Aw, shit, Constable. I've been learning the lines for weeks. Double, double, double crap. Okay. Let me get out of this fat suit and change into my civvies. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

The rest of the ensemble—Brick, Margaret, Big Mama, Mae and Gooper—looked on, noticeably disappointed.

"Don't worry, Frank. Your understudy's good. We'll manage until you get back. Knowing you, you'll have it sorted before the day's out."

Frank shook his head. "Sorry, all. I'll try to get myself back in time for tomorrow's performance. Break a leg! Okay, son. Wait in the car."

The rugged detective superintendent went into the changing room and quickly removed all the prosthetics and fat clothes, then put on his jeans, sneakers, and a shirt bearing the words "Darwin players do it dramatically".



CHAPTER TEN

“Find out what the holdup is, Wardy.”

The traffic had ground to a halt just at the start of the Joe Riley Bridge. This was the sole way out of Dorset Creek travelling north—the Baldrine River and its sandbanks effectively shut off any other way out of the town. Ward walked past about twelve vehicles towards the start of the bridge, finding a “Road Closed” sign. On the bridge itself, a truck was at a strange angle and had obviously lost part of its load.

After a couple of minutes, Ward got back to the CIB entourage and told his boss they were going to be stuck waiting for at least an hour.

“Bugger that, Wardy.” Vickers said, “I’ll walk across the bridge and meet you in town later.”

“Not a good idea, sir. There’s a load of fertiliser all over the place. The truck driver is sorting it out... slowly. He doesn’t look the kind you’d want to mess with. Told me he’d deck anyone who set foot on his workspace.” As soon as Sergeant Ward said those words, he realised his mistake. Too late...

“Did he now, Wardy? You know, as the superior officer, I don’t like people threatening my staff. I think I’ll have a friendly chat with him.”

Ward grimaced. “Friendly chat” usually meant “beat the crap out of”, and Ward was usually the one who was pressed into giving witness testimony that fell into (at least) the realms of poetic licence or, more often, brazen lies.

“Sir, it’s not too hot. Wouldn’t it be better if we just hung on and waited?” Ward was trying to treat his boss as one would attempt to calm a hungry and excitable Rottweiler.

“Don’t worry, Wardy. I’m in a good mood. It’s a lovely day. I’m sure that truck driver just accidentally made a poor choice of words. Trust me—I’ll be the epitome of discretion and restraint.”

“Yes, sir,” Ward sighed. “Epitome of discretion and restraint” were more ominous words than “I’ll break his arm”. More paperwork, more lies...

“Hey, you. Can’t you fuckin’ read? There’s a sign there saying the road’s closed. Which bit of ‘closed’ don’t you understand?”

“In a bit of a hurry, my good man. I’ll try not to tread on your potassium chlorate.”

“Don’t get smart with me, cunt. You think that Armani suit gives you the right to do what you want? Can’t you see I’m trying to clear up this shit? Get back or...”

Vickers smiled at the truckie. “I’m impressed!”

“What do you mean, impressed?”

“Well, this *is* an Armani suit. Cost a small fortune. I’m glad that you recognised it. Most of my staff couldn’t tell an Armani from a Simon Ackerman suit.” Vickers paused. “But I see we have different tailors. You should introduce me to yours one day.”

The truth was that the truckie couldn't recognise an Armani suit but had heard the name mentioned on a Miami Vice episode. Vickers was well aware of this. The truckie fumed at Vickers, eager for a fight and blissfully unaware of who he was dealing with.

"Yes, my good man. Those Cuban heels on your boots and that huge belt you're wearing set off those Levis quite well, although I think you're more suitably attired for Santa Fe, rather than the Northern Territory."

Vickers watched as, predictably, the truckie's face became a mask of arrogance, insolence, and anger. He grinned.

"Listen, cunt. I'm warning you for the last time. Get off this bridge—and I mean that way!" He pointed menacingly back at the traffic jam where Ward was waiting anxiously.

"Well, thank you for the kind advice. I choose to disregard it. I'll bid you a good day, sir." Vickers gave a little bow as he walked on.

The truckie tried to spin Vickers round by the shoulder and was already drawing back his right fist when Vickers sprang into action. He kicked the truckie's shin and, as the man doubled over in pain,



Vickers crashed his forehead down on the truckie's nose. With a short, sharp crunching sound, the nasal bones collapsed backwards. As the injured man fell further back, Vickers delivered a vicious blow to his stomach. The truckie fell to the floor and curled up in the foetal position, howling in pain. By then, Ward was running towards the pair.

“Sir, can’t I leave you for two fucking minutes without you getting into a fight?”

“Fight? You’re mistaken, Wardy. This gentleman was just giving me directions and slipped over, probably because of those silly heels on his shoes. Isn’t that right, Mr Truck Driver?” The truckie wasn’t in a good position to answer, but Ward could hear his swearing and cursing as he writhed on the floor.

“Give this gentleman a hand, would you, Wardy, and do explain that he should be more careful in future. I’ll see you at the pub later.”

Ward sighed again. *A great start*, he thought.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Forty-year-old Detective Superintendent Francis Alan Vickers strolled through the northern part of the town for about twenty minutes. Dorset Creek had received a lot of rain recently—the trees were in blossom and all the grass was thick and green. He thought that—in spite of the American presence in the town—it looked clean, pretty and very well maintained. He'd been in Dorset Creek quite a few times, mostly to check up on police audits.

Vickers was about to enter the Coronation Pub but at the last moment reconsidered—he detested the plethora of American flags in the window. Instead, he walked on to the Victory Hotel. He was pleased to see the Australian flag, even though the Star-Spangled Banner was right next to it. It was a fairly old pub, but like almost all the buildings in town, it was pretty well immaculate. The locals in town earned large incomes but, sadly, instead of investing their earnings, they ended up pissing their wages up against the wall, and since Amroc owned most of the property in town, the wages they paid their staff usually ended back into their own coffers.

Vickers had been to America for six months on secondment to the Jackson police force in Mississippi. He had ended up with the view that all of them were candidates for the inbred homosexual rapists out of *Deliverance*. He could almost hear the sound of “Duelling Banjos” as he walked into the hotel.

Ward finally managed to track down his boss. He’d tried calling him on his mobile, but Vickers had it switched off. This generally meant, “I’m drinking—don’t bother me”. Ward had been to four pubs before finally seeing the Superintendent sitting at a table with his omnipresent scotch.

“Wardy. Sit down. Take the weight off your feet. What are you drinking?”

“Just a mineral water with some ice and lemon, please.”

Vickers grunted his disapproval. He had known what Tony Ward would order, but muttered, as ever, “Mineral water. My god—what’s the world coming to?”

The midday sun was now radiating solid heat and the bar was filling up with manual workers just in for a “quick one”. The two policemen were in plain clothes, but were fully aware they were causing a ripple of interest around the room.

Vickers chose to ignore this as he gulped his scotch enthusiastically. “You know, Wardy, this isn’t a bad little town. I’ve been here a few times, and every time, it seems better. Good people here, too. Friendly and helpful. We should be able to wrap this case up fairly quickly.”

His companion was not in a mood to agree. “That truck driver will probably need surgery on his nose—and I wouldn’t care to comment on the state of his internal organs. Was that fracas really necessary, sir?”

Vickers chuckled. “You have to admit, he had it coming to him. Besides, what would the troops think if they saw their boss back

down to the likes of that thug? His clothing alone was a crime against humanity. Let's just say, word will get around that nobody fucks with Frank Vickers."

"That's for sure, sir. Nobody ever fucks with Frank Vickers—at least, never more than once." Ward agreed drily.

Vickers raised his eyebrows. "Do you know, Wardy, your language has deteriorated since you started working for me. I hope you don't regard me as a bad influence. I mean, you probably didn't learn this kind of policing when you were doing your master's degree in computer forensics?"

Vickers also had a master's degree, but never mentioned it. In fact, he almost regarded it as an embarrassment, as if it were something effete.

Vickers was the most intuitive detective Ward had ever met, but Vickers shrugged off any impressions of being academic. He found pretending to be uneducated was a useful tactic when questioning suspects, just like his favourite TV detective, Columbo. He saved his energy and acumen for when it was needed most. At present, he simply wanted to enjoy his whisky while observing as many people as he could in the pub. Pub customers were often a great font of knowledge.

With the glass drained, he got up and they both went outside. The town was beginning to return to normal traffic, the problem on the bridge having been sorted. The big semi-truck at the side of the road was ready to be picked up later by its owner. Adjusting to the heat and glare, Vickers and Ward stood for a moment, looking across the road, taking in the large, converted stone house that served as the town's police station.

Vickers gave his colleague a hearty thump on the back as he turned to him with a hearty smile. "Come on, grasshopper, let's kick some ass," he said, then strode purposefully across the road.



CHAPTER TWELVE

“Good morning to you, miss.”

“Good morning, sir. How can I help you?” Gina Costas, always friendly and sociable, gave the tall stranger a broad smile.

“Detective Superintendent Vickers from Darwin CIB. We’re here to investigate the Elizabeth Rivers case. I’ve already spoken with Sergeant Bell—he’s expecting me.”

“Oh, Superintendent. Please excuse me. I didn’t recognise you. I was expecting someone much older,” she said, with a cheeky grin to the superintendent, who took an immediate liking to this young police officer.

“You’ll go far, Constable. Delighted to make your acquaintance. I’d be even more delighted if you could rustle up some good, strong coffee. I solve crimes much quicker with caffeine in my system.”

“It’d be my pleasure, sir. Will a number 10 Nespresso be okay?”

“For one horrible minute I thought you were going to say Nescafe. Yes, a number 10 Nespresso is perfect—could you make it a double shot?”

“Certainly, sir. The rest of the crime squad got here some time ago, sir. They’re speaking with Sergeant Bell now.”

“Lead the way, Constable.”

“Tom, nice to see you. Tom. Let me introduce you to Detective Senior Sergeant Tony Ward. Very much my right-hand man. In fact, Tony will probably end up my boss one day. He’s sharp, but we’ve got to get him to lighten up a bit.”

“Sir, you’re embarrassing me,” Ward looked like he needed a hole to crawl into.

Vickers grinned. “Tom, you and I will drum this young gentleman into shape, right?”

“Frank, if he’s working for you, he’s already in shape, or you’d have booted him out ages ago.”

After a few more minutes of playful banter, Bell got down to the fundamentals of the case, presenting everything with a clearly written set of notes on a whiteboard.

Vickers was impressed with Bell. They had begun their police careers at about the same time, but were now heading in different directions. Bell was happy to run his little fiefdom in Dorset Creek as the head of the police station. He had no aspirations for higher office—that would have meant being sent far and wide in different areas of the Northern Territory, which was no good for a happily married man with three children, all whom lived in Dorset Creek. Tom Bell was content. He’d see out his job until the age of sixty, when retirement would kick in. Then he’d probably run for mayor.

Vickers, on the other hand, was always cut out for high office. In fact, the only reason he wasn’t already an assistant commissioner was because he never kowtowed to his superiors. Some liked this refreshing independence, but most of the old guard despised Vickers’ blasé attitude. However, his detection rate was the highest in the Northern Territory and probably the second in the whole of Australia.

“Okay, Tom, let’s get out to the Rivers’ house. I’d like to give it a thorough once-over before we interview the goons you have in the holding cell.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An hour later, Vickers was standing in the middle of the living room at 8 Willis Street as the crime scene assistants were leaving. His team was already at work around him, while Collins stood just inside the door, watching.

“Sergeant Collins, tell me anything else you might have missed when you found the body,” said Vickers.

“Sir, like I said at the briefing, she was on her back, face up. I got a real shock when I saw her. Maybe it was the adrenaline or something, but I didn’t really stop to take in the surroundings, as I should have. I knew she was dead the moment I saw her—it was a helluva shock.”

“Her head was at which end of the couch?”

“The far end, sir.”

Vickers squatted and took a close look at the couch, then straightened and walked to the broken window. “And one of the suspects says he came in through this window and found her lying on the couch?”

“Yes. He told us that he’d climbed in through the window to find the room unoccupied except for the body. He also said that morbid

music was playing on the laptop at the time, like something you'd hear in a funeral parlour."

"Morbid music?" repeated Vickers.

"Bastia says that Gee opened the door for him," said Collins, "and that he heard gloomy music too. Gee closed the laptop to turn it off."

Vickers was intrigued by this. Maybe Elizabeth Rivers' death had been a part of some ritual or other, and the music had played a part in it. Vickers opened the laptop and pressed the power button momentarily. Windows 8 came up after a few seconds, not needing a password.

"Wardy, this is your area of expertise. Try to get the computer to load up the programs that were running when it was shut down. Can you do that?"

"Sure, sir, easily. As long as the lid was just closed, that won't be a problem."

Ward typed a few characters and pages appeared on the laptop.

"Got it, sir. Microsoft Word was open—just a blank page. I'll check to see if anything's been wiped back at the station. Internet Explorer was loaded, with three pages. One is a horse racing page, one is recipes for cakes, and the third one is YouTube. It was set to play some composer called Albinoni. The song was 'Adagio in G Major'."

"Albinoni? Doesn't seem like it fits in with the surroundings. Not something I could imagine a man like Mike Nicholls would play. Try to find out from any friends of the Rivers girl if she was into classical music."

"Will do, sir. It might take a bit of time. It could get a little complicated—online music is mostly run by foreign companies. We'd have to arrange an international court order. I'll do my best."

But Vickers had already moved on. "Hello, what do we have here, Wardy? Will you look at that!"

"*Plutarch's Roman Emperors and Morals*. That's interesting. Again, not light reading for the likes of Mike Nicholls. Don't worry about the computer today, Wardy. Try to find out Rivers' tastes in books.

Although, looking around, I'd doubt this is something she bought. Look at the publication date. 2015, January. This book's just been published."

"You're saying whoever killed Rivers might be into Plutarch, sir?"

"It's a possibility, Wardy. The book and the music seem out of place. When anything's out of place at a murder scene, it's evidence, until proven otherwise. Find out where the book was bought, if you can. Look, there's a sticker here. ASIA-85566743. Has to mean something. ASIA. Hmm. An acronym? Over to you, Wardy—this is your problem now. Get any prints you can from it."

"Do you want me to get a spectroscopic analysis also, sir?"

The subtle sarcasm wasn't lost on Vickers, who played along with Ward's slightly snide remark.

"Yes, Wardy. Get a spectroscopic analysis. You know I haven't a clue what that means, but it sounds fancy and scientific. What can it show?"

"We can pick up all sorts of things. Like scents from perspiration. If the owner has sneezed on the book or got some saliva on it, we could even possibly pull some DNA. It's expensive, and a bit time-consuming."

"Something tells me the music and book are important. Run with this, Wardy. Call it 'Vickers' Intuition'."

Ward knew all too well to respect Vickers Intuition—it had proved almost supernaturally accurate on many previous occasions.

"What do you know about Plutarch, Wardy?"

"Wasn't he a first-century Greek philosopher, sir?"

"That he was, Wardy. A Greek philosopher who became a Roman citizen. Possibly a complete dead end, but you never know. I'm also interested in Albinoni. I don't know any of his works, do you?"

"Sorry, sir, never even heard of him."

A female voice, hiding a barely perceptible American accent, said, "Albinoni is a 17th-century Italian composer who fell into obscurity until the 1930s, when his work was rediscovered."

The cops all looked around to see Julia Delaney standing in the doorway.

“And who might you be, miss?” Vickers asked.

“Dr Julia Delaney,” she replied, walking towards him. “I attended here last night.”

“Ah.” His eyes flashed up and down the attractive blonde as he mentally undressed her. He gave her hand a powerful shake. She had a firm grip—that impressed him—there was nothing he liked less than a limp handshake. “Detective Superintendent Frank Vickers,” he announced. “This is Detective Senior Sergeant Ward. What can we do for you, doctor?”

“I saw you coming down here. I thought I might be able to help.”

“And you’re into classical music?” Vickers said.

She nodded. Julia had excelled in music at school, and had brought a large classical CD collection with her to Australia—it provided a musical oasis in the cultural desert of Dorset Creek. “I have most of Albinoni’s works.”

“Your friend Albinoni seems the odd man out in this house, wouldn’t you say, Doctor? Also, have you come across Plutarch’s writings?”

He showed her the book, which had been put in a plastic evidence bag.

“Sure. A Greek philosopher. He became a Roman citizen some time around the first century.” Vickers and Ward exchanged knowing smiles.

Julia continued, “It’s the sort of thing an academic researcher might use. Look at that price, though.” She pointed to the sticker, which read \$9. “That’s inexpensive for a new classical book. Is it a clearance item?”

Vickers mentally kicked himself. He’d missed out on that fact. And here was this attractive blonde who’d picked up on the price straight away. “I doubt it, Doctor. The book has just been just been published. Any other thoughts?”

“Why would anyone sell a new specialised book appealing to such a small client base for only \$9? It doesn’t make sense.”

Ward shrugged. “From a discount store, maybe?”

“Maybe.” Julia focused on the label. A faint recognition was ringing in the back of her mind. She had seen a label like this somewhere before, but she was damned if she could remember where. “I’m sure I’ve seen that ASIA somewhere before. Can’t think what it is.” She paused and looked up at the police officers. “Probably worth pursuing,” she noted.

Vickers didn’t reply. He was looking around the room, thinking back to the claims of the bookie and his two henchmen. Tandy was the only member of the trio who claimed to have seen anyone else at the house. Someone had shot him and he had blacked out, although he had no bullet wound to support his claim. This had supposedly taken place outside the back door. Vickers crossed the room to the kitchen, then moved to the back door.

There was a shiny key in the back-door lock. As Vickers reached to turn the key, something about it caught his eye. Looking closer, he saw a trace of dry blood on it. Once he had carefully turned the key and opened the door, he dropped the key into an evidence bag.

Outside the house, the heat of the day was nearly at its height, reflecting up off the yard’s concrete paving. Vickers pulled on sunglasses to combat the glare. There was nothing on the concrete to indicate that big Zeke Tandy had taken a fall there. On the chance Tandy had actually been shot at, Vickers joined Ward and his junior detective in scouring the area for a bullet casing, but they found nothing.

Noting a gap in the timber fence at the back of the property, Vickers wandered across to it. There was a dark smudge on the edge of the wood on the right side of the gap, at shoulder level. It could have been dried blood that had soaked into the brittle, weathered timber. He gave instructions for the stained pieces of wood to be removed for forensic examination.

Then he poked his head through the gap, taking in the laneway and Bourke Street beyond, immediately realising that it would have made an ideal escape route if Tandy was being truthful and there had been a fourth suspect at the murder scene the night before. “What description did Tandy give of his assailant?” he called to the constable, who had trailed him like a pet dog and now stood in the middle of the yard waiting to be useful.

“Tandy’s description of this mystery man wasn’t particularly helpful, sir.”

“All he says he saw in the dark was a hunched-over white male figure with a weapon of some kind in his hand,” Collins added.

“Maybe we should start looking for a hunchback,” Vickers joked as he turned back into the kitchen, addressing one of the crime scene technicians. “What about this blood on the floor?”

“Yes, sir, we’re looking into it. It might be old blood. Take a look at the blood on the ceiling above the couch, sir. It’s got me puzzled about how it got there.”

Vickers noted several small smudges on the polished boards, circled with chalk, then looked up and considered the spray of dark red spots on the ceiling above the couch. Dragging out a dining chair, he stood on it and studied the spray more closely.

“Thinking about redecorating?” said Julia, who had just come back into the room.

He looked down at her and scowled. “Still here? Was there something else you wanted to discuss, Doctor?”

“I thought I’d just mention that I took a look at Zeke Tandy in the cells first thing this morning. He’d been asking for a doctor. Actually, I looked at all three of the men who had been in the road accident.”

“And?”

Julia shrugged. “They’re all fine. Just a few bruises and abrasions. But I did find a puncture mark with a small tear under Tandy’s right

arm. It was identical to the puncture mark I found on Elizabeth Rivers' chest."

Vickers raised his eyebrows. "Tasered?"

"No. There were no burn marks around the wound."

"Interesting. So what are they?" He stepped down from the chair and slid it back under the dining table.

"I have no idea. Yet."

"Tandy said he'd been shot."

"Yes. But the puncture wounds were only three-eighths of an inch deep. And he didn't lose any blood to speak of. No weapon I've ever heard of would have done that. He told me he blacked out after he was shot. If it's true, it could have been some sort of high-voltage electrical shock, but not a Taser because there were definitely no scorch marks."

The conversation came to a halt abruptly as Collins walked in. "We've just had formal confirmation from the mine management that Mike Nicholls story checks out. The shift boss says Nicholls definitely stayed for the six o'clock shift. But no one at the mine has owned up to the phone call that got him out there. We're checking all the phone records to see if there's anything out of place."

"Someone lured him out there as a joke?" Julia suggested.

"Could be, Doc. Until we get all the phone records, we've only got his word for it that someone called him."

"But that would rule Nicholls out as a suspect?"

"Not necessarily," Vickers intervened.

"But he couldn't have been here *and* on the way to the mine at the same time," she persisted.

"He may have got a friend to call him, to establish an alibi." Vickers reminded her impatiently. "But that's for *us* to worry about, Doctor. No disrespect intended."

"Yes, of course," she conceded, realising she was venturing into the detectives' territory. "Well, is there anything more that I can do to help?"

“Could be,” Vickers returned. “You’re the medical expert—explain that for me, if you can.” Vickers pointed to the ceiling.

The doctor stood directly under the spray pattern so she could examine it more closely. “Very strange,” she commented.

“Definitely blood.” It was more of a statement than a question—Vickers had seen more than enough dried blood over the years to know what he was looking at.

“I’m pretty well certain it is.”

“So, how did it get there? From the wound on her neck?”

Julia looked at the couch where Elizabeth Rivers had lain, then back to the ceiling. She shook her head. “Not possible. Not from down there.”

“You’re sure?” Vickers asked.

“Physically impossible,” Julia replied emphatically.

“What if she was standing at the time, Doc?” Collins suggested.

She shook her head again. “No. Still impossible. Not from that neck wound. The jugular doesn’t spurt. Not like in the movies. It would have just gushed, steadily, like milk pouring from a jug. Not with any force behind it, just a steady flow.” She studied the spray, trying to imagine how it could have been created. “Ever seen blood on the ceiling like this in murder cases before, Superintendent?”

“Once,” Vickers replied. “Chainsaw.”

This prompted a faint smile on the young doctor’s face. “This may not have anything to do with the woman’s death, of course,” she said, still contemplating the ceiling as she thought aloud. “It may be old blood.”

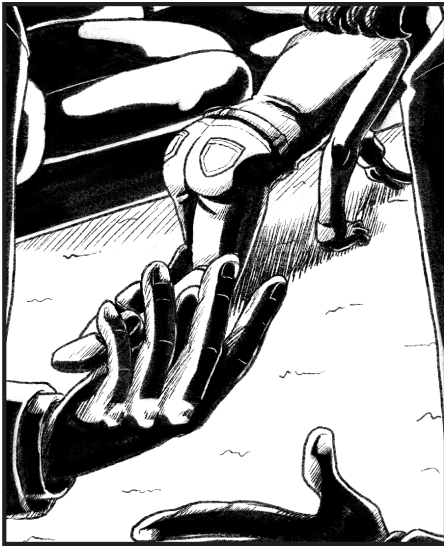
“Even if it is old blood, how did it get up there?” Vickers asked.

“A good question,” Julia said with a weary sigh, gazing up at the ceiling.

Vickers and Ward looked up at the blood on the ceiling again. “Well, Wardy, you’re the one with the degree in forensics. What do you make of that blood pattern?”

The young man took a moment to get over his disgust then, after a moment's thought, said, "It's unusual, sir. The pattern doesn't suggest blunt trauma. There's no sign of an arterial spray and a knifing is impossible—that blood spray happened close to the ceiling, no more than two or three feet away."

"Yet here she is on the couch and, and surely she wasn't magically levitated upwards. Of course, this could be the assailant's blood."



It was at this point they both noticed the doctor crawling around the couch, staring up at the ceiling, seemingly oblivious to the two pairs of eyes fixed on her movements. She stopped and got on her back, parallel to the body on the couch.

Vickers had an amused grin on his face and was about to make a crude remark, but stopped himself when he saw her fixed stare on the ceiling.

"Okay, Doc, I give up. Care to tell us what you're doing?"

She said nothing for a few seconds, then slowly got to her feet. "That blood splatter couldn't have been caused physiologically. That blood didn't come out of a body, as such. As you've both pointed out, the source of the blood was close to the ceiling, agreed?"

They nodded in unison.

"There was a mark in her neck. At the autopsy, I decided it was made by an intravenous cannula."

"Pardon?"

"You know—that thing we use to administer fluids into a person."

Vickers replied carefully, “Yes, Doctor, but as you see, there is no such device here. Besides, as you said, those devices are used to *give* fluids, not take them.”

Julia answered evenly, “But what if someone were taking blood from the girl and hurriedly removed the cannula by yanking it out? It would spray blood in an arc that shape, wouldn’t it?”

Wearing a deadpan face, Vickers continued, “Yes, of course, Doctor. So, what we’re talking about here is a vampire, yes? Unfortunately, nobody was spotted running from the scene in a black cloak with big teeth.”

Unfazed, the doctor continued, “The fact is that this girl lost a lot of blood. That was obvious from the autopsy, too. Cannula pattern on the ceiling, she’s as white as a sheet, no blood anywhere else in the house, and she died in this spot. Go on, then, Superintendent—you tell me how all these things add up.”

The two police officers glanced at each other with glimmers of smirks on their faces. This was not lost on Julia, who was beginning to form a dislike for this arrogant superintendent.

Vickers strolled around the small, dingy room, looking relaxed, but his eyes were bright and his mind was zinging. This case was shaping up to be interesting and challenging. He circled the crime scene, trying to figure out if he’d missed anything.

He picked up one of the evidence packets that had been laid out neatly on the dining table. It contained an opened foil package the size of a book of matches, white with orange print, its silver interior empty. He read the label: *B-D ALCOHOL SWAB. External Use Only.* The American manufacturer’s address was in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey. He had seen plenty of these in his time—not this brand, but the same product. Alcohol swabs were part of the blood test kits used by the police on suspected drunk drivers. A doctor would administer the test, but the needle, syringe and swab sets were held by the police. Vickers handed the packet to Ward. Without a word, Ward looked at

it briefly, then handed it back. Then Vickers held the plastic evidence bag out to the doctor.

“What do you make of that?” he asked Julia, who had been on her way out.

“It’s a swab container,” she said immediately, taking the plastic bag from him.

“Well, yes. Do you recognise the brand?”

She turned it over. “Yes. We use the same brand at the surgery.”

“It’s not uncommon, then?”

“Very common. Where did you get it? It’s not an item you can buy across the counter at the local pharmacy. What was it doing there?”

“You tell me,” he responded. “Have you treated either the girl or her boyfriend here recently?”

“No. I’ve never set foot inside this place before.”

“How many other doctors in Dorset Creek?”

“One other. Dr Kell. But Elizabeth Rivers is on my patient list—although I’ve never actually treated her. And Mike Nicholls is a patient of mine, too. He came in with the flu a few weeks back.”

“Are either Rivers or Nicholls known drug users?”

“Not as far as I’m aware.”

Vickers took the evidence bag back and placed it on the dining table with the others. “Then it’s possible that our murderer used it on Elizabeth Rivers?” he said.

“Yes,” Julia agreed. “But why would anyone want to do this? It’s so weird.”

“That’s for us to find out, isn’t it, Doctor?” he responded, again with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “Unless you can wrap up the case for us here and now?” He winked at Ward.

Julia bristled. “Well, it doesn’t take Einstein to work out that someone lured Mike Nicholls away to the mine, then came in here, tied up Elizabeth Rivers, and did his bit of business on her. I understand from Gina that Laurie Bastia and his cronies interrupted

him, and he went out the back way in a hurry, ran into Zeke Tandy and incapacitated him, with some sort of weapon.”

Vickers allowed a faint smile. “Very good, Doctor. Don’t suppose you can give us the murderer’s name, address, and motive while you’re at it?”

Julia, almost at her wits’ end, retorted, “Okay, fine. I’ll leave the detective work to you international super-sleuths.”

Vickers grimaced—the Northern Territory hardly figured on the Australian map, let alone on the international stage—but he maintained his composure.

“Thank you, Dr Delaney. You’ve been most helpful,” Vickers said with an indulgent smile. “I’d like to take a look at the body now, if that’s not too much trouble?”

“Of course, Superintendent. I’m heading back to the hospital now, if you’d like to follow me.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the Dorset Creek mortuary, Superintendent Vickers stood with Ward and Julia Delaney and slid out a stainless-steel shelf. The naked white corpse of Elizabeth Rivers lay on its back. The autopsy incisions had all been neatly sewn up, but still looked like the stitching on a flour or cement sack. But the body would be clothed for the funeral and no one would be the wiser.

“She was a pretty kid,” Vickers remarked matter-of-factly, squatting down to take a closer look as the doctor pointed to the entry wound on the neck and then the wound on the breast.

“And there was a mark on one of the suspects similar to these?”

Julia nodded. “On Tandy. In this area.” She lifted her own right arm and patted the fleshy under-arm area with her left hand.

“All right.” Vickers stood up. “Time to start asking questions.”

Julia walked with the cops to the front door of the hospital.

“My advice—my medical advice,” she said as they halted to say goodbye, “is to look for someone with medical training. The way they cannulated that jugular means they knew what they were doing.”

Vickers looked at her with a frown. "Pardon my ignorance, Doctor. Why do you say with such conviction that the perp 'cannulated the jugular'?"

She looked at Vickers with a puzzled frown. "You've seen the death certificate, haven't you? I certified Elizabeth Rivers as having died from exsanguination. A cannula was inserted into her jugular vein and her life blood was removed."

He looked at her in equal puzzlement. "Elizabeth Rivers died from cardiac arrest, brought on as a result of being tied up and tortured."

"What? You have seen the death certificate?"

"Of course I've seen the death certificate!"

"Then you would have seen that it said that Elizabeth Rivers died as a result of exsanguination."

Vickers shook his head. "Cardiac arrest."

"But that's—whose signature was on it?"

"Dr Kell."

"What? But that's ridiculous. I did the autopsy. I gave a full signed report of my findings, with the conclusion that she had died as a result of exsanguination. And, what's more, I did it in the company of Sergeant Collins and Eddie Weatherall, the wardsman."

"I'm afraid we have been presented with a slightly different version at police headquarters," Vickers said quietly. Looking at Julia's puzzled face, he went on, "Perhaps you had better show her the copy of the death certificate, Wardy." He turned to go, and added quietly under his breath, "And I'll go and have a chat with Dr Kell."

Ward opened the briefcase he was carrying and produced a death certificate, which he handed to Julia.

Under "Cause of Death", Julia read, "Cardiac arrest as a result of profound bradycardia due to vaso vagal stimulation". She saw the handwriting, and the signature at the bottom—both belonged to Howard Kell.

"Okay, Dr Delaney?" said Ward, taking the certificate back from her and returning it to the briefcase.

Stunned, Julia could only nod then watch Ward hurry after his boss. She was left standing in the hospital foyer with her mind in turmoil. Kell had done what he had threatened to do—he had written a death certificate for Elizabeth Rivers, altering the cause of death.

Julia knew for certain that in doing so, Kell had broken at least one law—enough for him to lose his licence to practise medicine. She could only guess how many other laws involving perversion of justice he might have broken.

As the reality of Kell's action sunk in, Julia realised she faced a decision. She could keep her mouth shut and go along with this, which Kell obviously expected her to do, or she could take it further. Her decision wasn't difficult. She didn't necessarily want to destroy Howard Kell's career, but every ethical molecule in her body screamed for action.

Decision made, she hurried toward Kell's office, prepared to give him a chance to right the wrong by handing the police the death certificate she had written. He could make some excuse about a mix-up in the office. That way he could save himself. It would be embarrassing for him, but not as embarrassing as finding himself in court.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dr Kell's office was on the far side of the general administration area. When Julia arrived, Kell was nowhere to be seen, and his office door was locked. Clemente, Kell's secretary, was also not at her desk. Kylie, the junior office assistant, looked up from her computer as Julia appeared in front of her.

"Kylie, do you know where Dr Kell is?"

"He's gone out to the mine to do a clinic, Dr Delaney," the girl replied.

"Damn!"

"Is everything all right, Doctor?"

Julia's mind was racing. "I did an autopsy last night. Has the transcript been typed up yet?"

"Yes, Clemente did the report first thing, before she went home."

"She went home?"

"Mm. Dr Kell said she'd come down with a virus. He sent her home before he went out to the mine."

"Get it for me."

Kylie looked at Julia with surprise—she was never usually that abrupt. Rising to her feet, she went to her colleague's desk and returned with a memory stick.

"Thanks." Julia took the key from her and hurried into her own office. As the autopsy report opened on the computer screen, she froze. In the report were the names of those present at the Elizabeth Rivers' autopsy: Dr Howard Kell, Sgt Wally Collins, and wardsman Edward Weatherall.

"Bastard!" Julia cursed.

Skimming through the report, her fears were realised—the early part of the postmortem examination was just as Julia had dictated it, but the last two-thirds was gone. Kell had scaled it down to a report supporting the finding of cardiac arrest.

Coming to her feet, she went back out into the general office, going directly to Clemente's desk. Calling Kylie to help her, she went looking for the original flash card onto which she had dictated the autopsy report the night before. Between them, they found two cards, but neither was labelled for the previous night's autopsy.

She remembered that she still had the key for Kell's office—he had been away when she had first arrived in Dorset Creek. She had moved into the only vacant office, the late Dr O'Brien's. Then, on his return, Kell had pulled rank and claimed the larger office.

Even though she had a feeling it would be a waste of time, she decided to try Kell's office. She inserted the key in the lock, and pushed the door open. Kylie hurried after her. "I don't really think you should be in here, Dr Delaney."

"Don't worry, Kylie. You can tell Dr Kell I went into his office. Call him now. Phone the newspapers, if you wish—I don't really care." Julia rummaged through every cupboard, drawer, and shelf.

It was a waste of energy. As she had thought, there was no card to be found. By now, he had probably burned it or buried it. As she closed the last desk drawer, another thought hit her: There had been others present at the autopsy, others who could verify that she had

conducted the autopsy. Julia brushed past Kylie and headed down the corridor. With a pained expression, Kylie pulled the door to Kell's office closed.

Meanwhile, Julia found the head nurse on duty. "Eddie Weatherall's on nights this week, isn't he?" she asked.

"That's right, Doctor," the silver-headed nurse replied. "But..."

"What time is he due on duty tonight?"

"He's not, Doctor. Some family trouble, apparently. Eddie left for Darwin this morning."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Vickers' meeting with Delaney had left him confused. She had insisted it was she who had done the autopsy, but why would she say that? Kell had been the town's doctor for years. He looked distinguished, sounded distinguished—damn it all, he was distinguished. Why would he make up a bogus autopsy? Delaney was



young, ferociously attractive, and a Yankee. Although she wasn't one of those alternative Californians, Vickers always had a lingering suspicion about Americans. But Julia was different. She looked you in the eye when she spoke. There wasn't a hint of guile in her, and she had a disarming smile and demeanour.

He shook his head, trying to make himself snap out of it.

“You’re a policeman, Frank. You’re immune to beautiful ladies’ ways.” But there was no way he could get the thought of Julia out of his mind. “If only I were ten years younger...”

Again trying to snap himself out of his fantasies, he set off to see Dr Kell to set things right. His thoughts turned to the time—it was late—and the inevitability of things shaping up to be a very long night.

He knew he was pushing buttons with the lateness of the hour, but arrived at the doctor’s surgery and showed his badge with brusque authority to the receptionist, who was just packing up to go home. She scurried off to announce his presence to the doctor, and then ushered him in.

Kell sat behind his desk, which was littered with the detritus of a busy, old-fashioned medic, papers and files everywhere. The portly doctor looked tired and older than his sixty-three years.

“Dr Kell. Thanks for seeing me at such short notice. I’ve got a bit of a problem on my hands—perhaps you can help.” Vickers believed that starting off friendly always yielded better results than jumping straight to icy and threatening questioning. Many of his colleagues used the laser beam, menacing eye approach—not Vickers. He knew that honey caught more flies than vinegar.

“Pleased to see you, sir,” said Kell. Vickers’ ears pricked up. Why would Kell refer to him as “sir”? He was a senior doctor.

Suspicious already, his lie detector honed from so many years in the police force, Vickers explained Julia’s claim about the autopsy.

Rising up from his desk, Kell came to stand close to Vickers in a way that the superintendent thought was a tad invasive of his personal space.

Kell dropped his voice into semi-conspiratorial tones. “Superintendent Vickers. I trust that everything we say is in absolute confidence.” He paused to give a generous smile. “Julia—Dr Delaney, that is—has been under a great deal of stress recently. I’ve had cause to reprimand her for her strange actions and behaviour. To be perfectly

honest, I think she's become a little paranoid. I've even offered to put her on medication. Her contract is coming up soon and, regretfully, we won't be renewing it. I say this with a heavy heart, as I've come to like Julia a lot. When she's lucid, she's delightful. A charming, well-bred and highly intelligent lady—but she's a lady with a lot of emotional baggage. If you want my opinion, her failed engagement, social isolation in this small town, and being so far from home has been too big a strain. The poor girl has really been through a hell of a lot recently."

Vickers nodded intently. "Do you have anything in writing to substantiate that, Dr Kell?"

"No. I didn't want to put anything down in writing—I didn't want to ruin her career. She'll come good soon enough. She has to first admit that there is a problem—that's the first step in any mental illness. I have no doubt that given a little time and the right treatment, she'll be a perfectly adequate doctor. However, if her condition becomes public knowledge, it'll destroy her future. I couldn't do that to her." He paused again. "I regret that you and I have found ourselves in this—how shall I say?—compromising situation."

Vickers was trying to determine if Kell was being sincere. If not, he was a good liar.

"Yes, Dr Delaney did do an autopsy and came up with a frankly bizarre diagnosis that someone had drained the Rivers girl of all of her blood. Of course, Sergeant Collins was dumbfounded when he heard that load of old nonsense and urgently called me back from my conference. If he hadn't, Dorset Creek would end up as the Northern Territory's laughing stock, you understand. Collins confided in me that Dr Delaney had a strange look in her eyes and was behaving in an unhinged manner during the autopsy. I, in the presence of Sergeant Collins, decided to conduct another autopsy. The results were plain and obvious: The Rivers girl died from a heart attack due to emotional trauma. I tore up Julia's autopsy report and wrote up a correct one. Of course, it's a little irregular, but I thought that if I let

her findings go through, Julia would be finished. I couldn't let that happen to her."

"But, Dr Kell, you know it's illegal to tamper with an autopsy report. If the autopsy report was incorrect, why didn't you call the home office pathologist and ask him to make an amendment?"

Kell pursed his lips. "I didn't tamper with anything. I dismissed what appeared to be the musings of a woman with too fertile an imagination. She's probably seething with hormones. Of course I could have called the home office but you know how long it takes to get those fatheads into action. It could have been a week before I got a response. By that time, who knows what Dr Delaney might have done?" Kell shook his head. "She may have decided to contact the papers and, for all I know, told them that the Rivers girl had been attacked by Martians. Imagine if one of your detectives had come out with some ludicrous idea that would destroy the good name of your department. Would you just let it go public? You'd have a word with that detective, and if he stuck to his guns, would you just let him make a complete fool of himself, or would you take control of the situation? Julia's been like a daughter to me this past year. Have you never covered for your colleagues to save them from themselves?"

Indeed, Vickers had done just that for years—many times, in fact. Sergeants who had been a little heavy-handed with an interrogation subject; constables who had written up evidence in a colourful way. Vickers had bent the rules on so many occasions that he'd lost count. As far as Vickers could see so far, Kell was making more sense than Delaney—and her results did sound as if they could be straight out of a cheap sci-fi novel.

"Superintendent, if I discussed with a third party every action I took as a doctor, I wouldn't have time to save lives. You've seen how busy the practice is. Sometimes I just have to do things quickly and move on with the job. Believe me, if you'd been the senior doctor here, you'd have done exactly the same thing. Anyway, I don't benefit

from what an autopsy says. I did what I did with the best of intentions for Dorset Creek, Dr Delaney, and the victim.”

“Okay, Dr Kell, we’ll let things ride. The girl still died as a result of foul play, so the coroner may yet decide to have a third autopsy performed. I’ll accept your version of events as being the correct ones for now, but it might have saved time if you’d have told me what you’d done first. Thanks for your time—and don’t worry, this conversation will be kept between us.”

“You’re very welcome, Superintendent Vickers. Glad to be of assistance to both the police and Dr Delaney.”

There was that tone again. Kell’s version sounded fine, Vickers thought, but was he trying a bit too hard to be pleasant and helpful?

Vickers left Kell’s office and walked out into the cool air, lighting up a cigarette—the third one of the day. The Davidoff packet gleamed in the light. These cigarettes cost three times as much as ordinary ones, but since Vickers had cut down to just a few a day, he thought he might as well get the best quality that money could buy. He had decided the same for his solid-gold Dunhill lighter, hand-engraved with “F.A.V.”. If Frank Vickers was going to get lung cancer, he’d do it in style.

As he walked along Victoria Street to his hotel, he saw that the jacaranda trees were in full bloom and the gardens of the neat houses were looking healthy. No shortage of water here, apparently—it was a well-run and affluent town council. He sighed. Everything looked so pretty—a nice change after the gruesomeness of the day.

The Central Motel was as modern and sterile as any motel in an affluent country town. The bed was large and comfortable, for which he was extremely grateful. He flopped onto it wearily and let out a long hard sigh. This was going to be a five-scotch problem. He uncorked the bottle of twelve-year-old The Macallan and poured himself a triple. While sipping the amber liquid, he reviewed the details of the case.

Nothing he'd investigated before had been quite like this. Delaney didn't seem unbalanced at all—she seemed to have a strong hold on reality and spoke in an articulate and intelligent manner. She was a pathologist—a pathologist who had become a family physician. Kell was a family physician who did occasional autopsies. In theory, Delaney should be way better at chopping up corpses than Kell.

On the other hand, the diagnosis of exsanguination was just plain crazy. Why would anyone want to drain someone's blood? And in a town like Dorset Creek? But Vickers had come across some very strange people in his time.

Then again, what was Kell's motivation? He was sixty-three, had been a doctor for thirty-five years, and had an impeccable professional record. Ditto for Constable Collins.

Delaney had looked genuinely nonplussed when Vickers told her about the Rivers autopsy. No one was that good of an actor. Vickers nodded—another chat with the good doctor Delaney was needed. This time, he'd try not to be so charmed by her. No, instead, he'd turn the screw a little and see if she cracked under pressure.

On a whim, he picked up the phone and rang through to the police station, introducing himself to the desk clerk, who was immediately attentive and courteous.

"I'm just wondering if Constable Collins is on duty at present," he asked. For some reason, he was not too surprised at the answer.

"I'm sorry, sir. Wally Collins is on vacation. He won't be back for another two weeks."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At exactly eight pm, a white Toyota Land Cruiser with blacked-out windows turned in through the gates to the sports ground at Yarracoot, an hour and a half's drive to the north-west of Dorset Creek. It bumped around the dirt track that traced the sports ground's perimeter until its lights fell on the brown VW Transporter van parked under the clump of jacaranda trees. It swung in beside the van and came to a halt. Its engine stopped and lights went out.

From the bunker-like concrete change room building a hundred yards away, Wolf Kroeger surveyed the now-silent scene. He had been holed up in the dirty, urine-smelling change room for hours since arriving at the sports ground in the early hours of the morning.

He waited for ten minutes, looking and listening, making sure the Land Cruiser hadn't been followed. Finally, he emerged into the night and walked quickly over to the vehicle. He opened the front passenger door and clambered in beside the driver.

"Wolf, I was beginning to worry—I've been waiting for ten minutes," said the woman in the driver's seat. Her name was Dorit Gazal. She was a USA Jewish New Yorker who had migrated to Israel

in her late teens, a one-time fitness and unarmed combat instructor with the Israeli Army. She later worked for El Al airlines as a sky warden before being recruited by Mossad, the state security service specialising in intelligence gathering. Gazal had been an independent operator for the past three years, and the mercenary company Tactical Solutions Worldwide, based in Paris, was one of her regular employers. Tanned and toned, she had an oval face with pronounced cheekbones, narrow eyes, and blonde hair that was cropped short. Wearing a light T-shirt and shorts, she was 5'9" and muscular, with small, firm breasts and well-defined biceps. As a cover, she worked as an aerobics instructor in New York, where her parents still lived. Since the beginning of the month, she had been operating as Wolf Kroeger's advance person on this Australian operation.

"There was a problem in Dorset Creek," Kroeger said, looking out into the night, his eyes searching for any indication they were being observed.

"What kind of problem?" Gazal asked, the concern obvious in her voice.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," he said in his monotone. "But the Volkswagen may have been spotted. I'll be using this vehicle from now on." He handed her the keys to the VW.

"What do you want me to do with it?" she asked.

"Dump it. Make sure it isn't found, at least not for many weeks. Grind the VIN and engine numbers off. Then buy something else locally. Once you're in Darwin, get me another van, then have Faranelli make the usual modifications."

"Okay."

"You brought the equipment?"

"It's all in the back," she advised. "When are you going to do the next job?"

"Tonight. I want to move on as soon as possible—the police will probably be looking for the VW. Now, tell me about the next target."

“George Stapleton, age fifty-two, lives alone. His wife died two years ago of a heart attack. Has had numerous health problems, and lives on an invalid pension. No heart trouble, though—the dart won’t kill him. He’s nervous and security conscious. He has security chains on front and rear doors.” She reeled it off from memory.

“I’ll need bolt cutters.”

“There’s a small set in the back. The security chains aren’t thick.”

“Go on.”

“Stapleton goes to bed religiously at nine every night. There’s no reliable rear exit route, so you’ll have to go in and out via the front entrance. But the house is located in a quiet, semi-industrial street, with only three other houses, plus small factories and warehouses. The street is a cul-de-sac. There’s no driveway or garage to the house, so it could be difficult to remove the body without being seen. I recommend that it be disposed of on the premises. He’s a smoker, by the way.”

Kroeger nodded, remembering their initial briefing meeting in Alice Springs a little more than a week before, when they had run down the list of forty-five names and selected twelve potential targets. “The fire option, then.”

“Uh-huh. There’s a small oxygen cylinder in the back, along with goggles and breathing apparatus.”

“Anything more that I should be aware of?”

“No, Wolf.”

In a more menacing voice than usual, he said, “Don’t be too quick to answer. You got it wrong in Dorset Creek.”

Gazal felt a chill run down her spine. “How? I covered everything,” she protested.

“The boyfriend was at home. What made you think he was working this week?”

“I got it from a neighbour.” Her mouth was starting to dry out.

“I want confirmation of that sort of information. Nothing secondhand. If I hadn’t listened in with the laser device, I wouldn’t

have known he was around. That would have led to an unnecessary complication.”

“What did you do?”

“I got him out of the house with a fake telephone call. But the call shouldn’t have been required. So, there won’t be any further errors on your part. Do I make myself clear? Our employers won’t accept any mistakes—no excuses. If you screw up, I screw up. If I screw up, it’ll all come down on our heads like a ton of bricks. He was smiling, but that scared Gazal more than if Kroeger had been foaming at the mouth.

“There won’t be anything like that again,” she assured him. She reached over to the back seat and took a folded piece of paper from her bag. “Here’s a map, showing how to find the target’s house, and, on the reverse, the route to the local airstrip.” She unfolded the piece of paper and handed it to him. There were hand-drawn maps on both sides.

Kroeger refolded the piece of paper and slipped it into his breast pocket without looking at it. “I’ll do the job between nine and ten,” he advised. “Call our contact and tell him to meet me at one am.”

“Meet you at one am,” she repeated. “Anything else?”



“Dorit, don’t let me down again. Be more careful, more thoughtful. Think ahead. You know how important this mission is. Paris rewards success, but they also reward failure. I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen—I’ve grown to like you.” His smile sent a shiver through Gazal, and she felt her blood run cold. Kroeger never made threats he wouldn’t act out.

With that ominous warning, Kroeger got out, then walked around to the driver's door.

Gazal stood by the car door as he climbed up and slid in behind the wheel. "We'll meet tomorrow night, as arranged?"

He nodded once then closed the door. He started the Land Cruiser's engine, then slowly drove off towards the sports ground gates.

Gazal walked to the VW Transporter and clambered in, shaking. "Shit, shit, shit!" she cursed, pounding the steering wheel with her fists.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dusk had long settled into night as the white Land Cruiser parked opposite and just a little down from George Stapleton's house in Lanark Place, Yarracoot. The house, a fifty-year-old weatherboard on stilts, sporting peeling wooden window frames and rusty air conditioning units sitting on window ledges, was in darkness except for a single lit side window towards the rear.

The STG laser listening device had been set up on the back seat. Wolf Kroeger adjusted the transmitter so it pointed towards the light, then reached across and wound down the rear left window and switched the equipment on. It was a far-from-satisfactory arrangement, and in a street of a purely residential area, it would have invited detection.

As it was, he allowed himself just several minutes there, hunched down in the front seat with headphones on. He soon heard a lone male voice, talking as if to a companion, but there was no response. As he listened, Kroeger heard George Stapleton refer to his companion as Lucky, and realised the man was talking to a dog. The fact that

Kroeger could hear nothing suggested it was a larger, docile animal, rather than a small, yappy animal. But even an apparently docile dog could pose a problem for Kroeger if he were to go in there unprepared. The last thing he wanted was a basset hound clamped to his ankle. He murmured a curse—Dorit Gazal had let him down again. She should have warned him about the pet.

Nothing George Stapleton said indicated there was anyone else in the house or that he was expecting anyone to visit during the remainder of the evening. After eavesdropping for five minutes, Kroeger wound the car window up again, turned off the STG equipment, started the engine, and drove away.

Less than two hours later, the big Toyota was cruising slowly back into George Stapleton's street. The vehicle drew to a halt outside a small corrugated iron factory, next door to the target's house. Five minutes later, the light in the back room went out, and then the light in the front bedroom came on, only to be quickly extinguished.

Kroeger opened the car door, reached across to the black medical bag sitting on the front seat beside him, then got out. He was dressed for work: black trousers, black T-shirt, black leather bomber jacket, black leather gloves, black military boots. This clothing was not common attire for locals, but the colour was necessary to avoid being seen at night. After carefully closing the door with the weight of his body so that he made the minimum amount of noise, he locked the door and moved on.

There was no front fence. The shallow front lawn ran to the public footpath. A cement path led to the front door, and another path ran off to the left and down the side of the house. Kroeger trod the second path. It took him around to the back of the house, where he would not be seen from the street. He climbed a few worn wooden

steps to a landing at the back door, put down his black bag, and knocked.

His first knocks brought no response. He rapped again. Inside the house, a dog began to bark. Kroeger had guessed correctly—the bark was deep and guttural, and came from no small mutt. He reached into a jacket pocket and withdrew his dart gun.

A light came on in the laundry and a key turned in the lock. The back door opened. But it only opened a crack before being restrained by a security chain. Dorit Gazal had been right about that. The opening was on Kroeger's left, so he quickly transferred the weapon to his left hand.

"Yes? What is it?" came a nervous voice from the other side of the door. Now the dog began to bark behind the man.

"Back, Lucky," the man called to the dog over his shoulder.

"Mr Stapleton?" said Kroeger.

"Yes. What do you want?"

Kroeger pushed the dart gun in through the small opening, at chest height. It was almost point-blank range. *Crack!* The figure on the other side of the door let out the beginning of a cry then fell backwards and hit the floor with a thump.

A dog's snout suddenly appeared in the opening between door and doorpost. Snarling viciously, baring its teeth, eyes flaring, a full-grown, sandy Labrador tried to get at Kroeger. Only the narrowness of the gap prevented it from reaching him.

Kroeger reloaded a dart and quickly fired it at the dog. The Labrador was hit in the middle of the back and spun into a backflip. Kroeger's professionalism allowed only the faintest smile.

He pulled out a small pair of bolt cutters. Time was of the essence now—he needed to get into the house quickly. The last thing he needed was for someone to come to investigate the barking of the dog and find him stranded on the doorstep. He snipped the chain in two then returned the bolt cutters to his pocket. Bag in hand, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

In the stark glare of the fluorescent light in the ceiling, dressed in a red tartan dressing gown, blue pyjamas, and slippers, the bony figure of George Stapleton lay on his back, one arm across his chest. The dog lay on its side beside his owner, eyes open, legs jutting out stiffly.

Kroeger put down his bag then closed and locked the door. He knelt beside Stapleton and felt for a pulse on the carotid artery on the right side of the neck. Satisfied his victim was still alive, he glanced at the dog. As he had expected, the cone shell toxin dose had been excessive for the dog's mass and had been enough to stop the animal's heart. Lucky was dead.



Kroeger opened his black bag and produced a roll of grey packaging tape. With a flourish, he quickly circled Stapleton's wrists and ankles and then covered his mouth in what had become his practised custom.

Taking a penlight from his breast pocket, Kroeger lit his way into the next room, the kitchen. A Laminex table sat in the middle

of the room, flanked by four metal chairs with red vinyl seats. The whitegoods were old and yellowing; nothing in the kitchen was under forty years old.

He moved on, into a darkened living room, then into the corridor to the front door. At the right was the master bedroom. Kroeger carefully entered the bedroom, checking it was empty and noting

the bedclothes already turned back on the right side of the bed. On the bedside table, sitting on top of a folded *Racing Guide*, he was pleasantly surprised to find a packet of Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes and a disposable gas lighter. He slipped both into the right pocket of his jacket. Returning to the hall, he checked beyond the other two doors opening onto it. One of the rooms was a bathroom; the other was piled high with junk.

Satisfied there was no one else in the house, he went back into the living room, pulled down all the brittle brown canvas blinds, then flicked the light switch by the door. In the light of a dusty three-globe light fitting suspended from the ceiling, the room was a sorry collection of shabby old furniture. The rose-patterned fabric on the chairs and couch was grubby, the woodwork chipped, scored, and discoloured. A cracked glass cabinet under the window displayed the late Joy Stapleton's dusty collection of mismatched crockery, cheap porcelain figurines of ballet dancers, and souvenir teaspoons collected during holidays interstate. On the walls hung framed pictures of famous racehorses, all clipped from magazines, exposing the great passion in George Stapleton's life: horse racing. He was a dedicated and unsuccessful gambler.

Kroeger returned to the laundry, grabbed Stapleton under the arms, dragged him through the kitchen and into the living room, and then heaved him up onto the elderly couch. Quickly and methodically, he went to work.

First the leather gloves were swapped for surgical ones. Then came his usual procedure, inserting a cannula and setting up the collection equipment. That done, he prepared a syringe with pancuronium, laid it to one side, then removed a small oxygen cylinder from his bag and placed it on the floor in readiness.

With all preparations made, he moved to the light switch and turned off the living-room light. Passing through the kitchen, he went to the laundry and extinguished the light in there, as well. His actions were deliberate—he knew that if George Stapleton went

to bed religiously at a specific time every night, others, including neighbours, would probably notice if something was amiss. From this point on, the house would have to be in relative darkness.

An old computer running Windows XP with a heavy CRT monitor was on a nearby desk. The screensaver was stars flying towards the viewer, as if it were the bridge on a Star Trek episode. The webpage already loaded was Betfred.com, an English online betting site. Kroeger brought up YouTube, but this time, he pre-emptively pressed CTRL-SHIFT-DEL, bringing up the delete browser history dialogue, so that with one press of the “D” key, he could delete the browsing history and leave no trace. A blood extraction without the relaxing sounds of Albinoni was unthinkable, but he wasn’t going to make the same mistake again as he had at the Rivers house.

He was satisfied no one could connect him with the book he had to leave behind in Dorset Creek, but had learnt from his previous error that the unexpected could happen. If anyone turned up at Stapleton’s house this evening, there would be no racing around like two nights ago.

Kroeger went back to the laundry, pushing the dog’s corpse to one side with his boot. He took the penlight from his pocket and set it on top of the washing machine so it pointed at the broken security latch. Turning the light on, he set to work. One by one, he removed the screws that held the security latch fitting in place on the door and on the door post. The two halves of the fitting came away. Their screws, the penlight, and the screwdriver all went into his black bag. Only the most keen-eyed observer would realise there had once been a security latch in place. Satisfied, Kroeger returned to the living room and took a seat opposite his victim.

After several more minutes, Stapleton moved several fingers; he was starting to regain consciousness. Kroeger, as if bound by a macabre ritual, explained to Stapleton that the music he was listening to was Albinoni—and he would like it.

Kroeger knelt by his victim, picked up the syringe lying on the carpet, and began to inject pancuronium into the IV tube. After an hour had passed, George Stapleton was dead. Kroeger removed the cannula and stowed away his equipment and the near-full container of blood in his black bag.

As he had done so many times before, he now removed all the grey tape from the body and returned it to his bag, which he placed by the door, open. He donned a pair of plastic goggles and breathing mask, and opened the packet of cigarettes he'd pocketed earlier. He removed one cigarette. Then, using the gas lighter, he lit the cigarette and placed it on the couch beside the dead man. He dropped the lighter on the floor. Taking up the oxygen cylinder, he directed the outlet nozzle at the smouldering cigarette and depressed the activating valve.



As expected, the oxygen caused a fierce flame that burned blindingly bright. The cigarette disappeared in the white glow. The rose-patterned fabric of the couch caught fire, then the polyurethane foam padding beneath it did the same. In seconds the couch was ablaze, filling the air with dark smoke and acrid fumes.

While the human body is made up of over sixty per cent water, body fat is highly combustible and burns readily. The subcutaneous fat melts, vaporises, then combusts. Surrounded by the equally combustible fabric and foam, George Stapleton's body would be consumed by the fire within minutes. And then all evidence of the actual cause of death would be

gone. Even if the fire failed to spread beyond the couch, Kroeger's purpose would be served. The coroner could be expected to rule that George Stapleton had fallen asleep on the couch while smoking, and the cigarette subsequently caused the fire that killed him.

The flames lit the room with an orange glow as Kroeger picked up his black bag and headed for the laundry. At the back door he quickly pulled off the goggles, face mask, and oxygen cylinder, returning them to the black bag. The lock in the back door was a latch type. Kroeger set the latch then stepped outside and pulled the door shut. It locked automatically behind him.

In a short time, he would meet his associates at the Yarracoot airstrip and hand them his equipment and the results of his night's work. Stapleton would be ruled as a victim of an accidental fire, another advertisement for the perils of smoking. As for the dog, even if the animal's corpse wasn't destroyed in the fire, nobody conducts autopsies on dogs—it would be concluded that he had died of smoke inhalation.

Well satisfied with his work, Wolf stepped out into the black of the night.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was seven am and Julia was ready for work. *Another busy day*, she thought. Attending to all the back sprains, failed contraception, eye injuries, and alcohol-induced stomach upsets.

Julia was deep in thought, staring at the opposite wall, when she was startled by the phone. It was Simon Ansley, a doctor colleague, who was Delaney's equivalent at Yarracoot. For months he had been pestering Delaney to stand for the committee of the Rural Doctors Association, for which he was vice president. He argued that the RDA needed more young doctors and more women to shape its future. She expected this call to be another in the same vein.

"Morning, Simon," she said. "How are things in Yarracoot?"

"Morning, Julia. Your Dorset Creek murder's all over the front page of *The Territorian*."

"I haven't had a chance to read any newspapers, Simon."

"You did the autopsy, I take it? Was it a robbery gone wrong?"

"No. It was quite weird, actually."

"How do you mean?"

If it had been someone other than a fellow doctor, Julia would have kept her mouth shut. As it was, Julia knew she could discuss this with Simon. “She had her blood drained till she died. Poor kid.”

“Christ! What did they do, sever her arms and legs?” There was a gentle, embarrassed laugh in Ansley’s voice.

“They used a cannula, actually.”

“A cannula? That’s bizarre. Someone was being inventive. It must have been agony for the kid.”

“Mm. Looks like they harvested the blood. God knows what they wanted with it—she had von Willebrand’s.”

“Von Willebrand’s? What do you know about that? I lost a haemophiliac myself last night.”

Julia frowned. “Really?”

“Yes, looks like the silly bugger fell asleep with a lit cigarette in his hand. Burnt to a crisp, he was. I kept telling him that cigarettes would be the death of him.”

An alarm bell sounded faintly in the back of Delaney’s mind. It was probably purely coincidental that two of their patients with similar disorders had died violent, non-natural deaths within such a short period of time. Then again...

“Any suspicions about the cause of the fire, Simon? Foul play, and all that?”

“Foul play? No, no, no. No suspicious circumstances. Purely an accident.”

“Any other casualties?”

“Not apart from the man’s dog.”

“His dog?”

“A Labrador. It was in the house with George. Must have died from smoke inhalation.”

“Right. The dog wasn’t burnt?” she asked as an afterthought.

“The dog? No, the fire brigade put the fire out before it got to the dog. But tell me about your murder—much more interesting.”

“Simon, can we talk again later?”

“Oh, okay,” he came back, his disappointment obvious.

“Just one thing before I go. That dog—what happened to it?”

“I don’t know. Given to the local vet for disposal, I suppose.”

“I see. Got to go, Simon. Good to hear from you.”

“Yes, all right. I’ll give you another call later.”

“Do that. Bye.” She hung up, then sat back, thinking.

There might not be any connection whatsoever between the two deaths. Then again, she had never been a great believer in coincidence. A doctor—especially a pathologist—is trained to identify symptoms that form a pattern, and to explore that pattern until it provides enough information to form a diagnosis. Call it female intuition or call it a good doctor’s nose for a diagnosis that wasn’t quite right, but Julia Delaney felt that something just did not add up here.

At the time of seeing the faked autopsy, Julia had been livid with rage. Once that initial anger had settled, Julia had stewed for the day, thinking of ways to get back at Kell. Report him to the medical board? The police? Expose him in the media? After thinking about it for twenty-four hours, these ideas had become less and less appealing. Kell influence would only make it difficult for Julia, and he almost certainly could bring up a bevy of witnesses to confirm that he was the one who did the autopsy.

No point in trying to get a statement from Eddie the wardsman—he knew which side his bread was buttered on, and so did Collins. This was an Amroc town, and Kell would only have done this on the behest of Amroc. No, exposing Kell would simply engender a whitewash. Julia would be dismissed and disgraced.

But should she just roll over and die, like all the other financial hostages in Dorset Creek? That wasn’t what Julia was. She was her own person, owned by no one. She’d already overcome many

disadvantages to rise through the ranks in the pathology arena, which was ninety per cent made up of the good old boys network.

No way on God's earth, she thought to herself. Elizabeth Rivers had been murdered, and whoever had done it was going to be brought to justice. She'd work at making it happen while any breath was left in her body.

Parked outside of the surgery, Julia called Kell's direct line from her mobile.

"Julia. I'm glad you called. We should have spoken yesterday—there were a few important issues I wanted to run by you."

Hearing his voice, Julia's anger bubbled up. "Howard, you're a class-A bastard. What in hell's name do you think you're doing? Don't you realise you've committed a crime? I could have your medical licence revoked for this. Are you stupid enough to think I wouldn't do anything? Amroc's behind this, right? Well, when I'm finished with you—"

Kell cut in. "Julia, Julia, settle down. I'm not your enemy, and neither is Amroc. I was looking after you. You didn't seriously intend that absurd diagnosis to go to the coroner's office, did you? They'd have carted you off to the lunatic asylum. You'd have been finished forever. I put my neck on the line for you, to save you from yourself. The police called me and said that you were raving on about some crazy theory with the Rivers girl. They arranged a charter plane to get me back, to try to clear up the potential media disaster that you were about to create. I'm your friend, Julia. I was looking after you—and now you've called me up, insulted me, threatened me, and accused me of a crime, when all I've done is to look after your interests. How could you be so ungrateful?"

This somewhat took the wind out of Julia's sails. She'd hoped Kell would be apologetic—instead, he sounded hurt. Could it be she'd misjudged him? Was it possible Kell was really trying to help—even misguidedly? Was there any possibility Kell was being truthful?

“I don’t know what to think, Howard. You should’ve discussed things with me before you changed the autopsy report. And—the renal tubules showed acute necrosis. How do you explain that? If there’d been blood at the scene, that would have explained it, but there wasn’t—not a drop. So how did Elizabeth Rivers have acute tubular necrosis?”

“Julia, you’re not thinking straight. What’s to say she didn’t develop a huge nose bleed just prior to those thugs breaking into the house? She would have gone straight to the bathroom sink. She’s a haemophiliac. Isn’t a nose bleed a possibility? Suppose she’d had a massive gastric bleed and threw the blood up into the toilet? She could have had just been too stupid to call the ambulance. Then the thugs broke in, tied her up and scared the living daylights out of her. Couldn’t that have caused a vasovagal reaction? Wouldn’t that have dropped her blood pressure still further and couldn’t that explain the acute tubular necrosis? You jumped to a ridiculous conclusion. Dorset Creek would have been the laughing stock of outback Australia for decades, and your professional credibility would have been ruined. There wasn’t nearly enough evidence to suggest she’d died from deliberate exsanguination. That sort of crap belongs in a 1970s Hammer horror film. If you sit down and think about it, you’ll see sense in what I’ve said.” He paused. “When you’re ready to apologise for your offensive language, I might—just might—consider accepting it.”

A pregnant silence followed. Julia realised there was some measure of credibility in what Kell said.

“What about the cannula in her neck? She couldn’t have done that herself. How do you explain that?”

“Julia, again, you’re jumping to conclusions. How do we know her boyfriend didn’t try to inject something into her neck? He could have screwed it all up, pulled the cannula out, and that would have caused the splash on the ceiling. You said in your report the cannula had gone right through the jugular. Yet at the same time, you’re

saying that whoever drained her blood is sophisticated. Isn't that a contradiction? Doesn't it seem more like something Rivers did to herself, maybe her boyfriend, maybe the goons? Granted, it's a little far-fetched, but just imagine, for instance, someone else did put a cannula in her neck, not to drain her blood, but to give her drugs—or maybe in a vain attempt to save her. Maybe it was those thugs? They broke in, saw her doing something weird, and panicked. Maybe they were the ones who yanked out the cannula. Maybe one of them Tasered the girl, to frighten her, and it all went horribly wrong. There are a hundred different scenarios I can imagine that could account for what happened.”

“Howard, I might have been a little hasty. But you should have run it by me first. That's only professional courtesy.”

“Julia, for Christ's sake! I got off the plane at nearly one am. Then I had to spend two sodding hours doing an autopsy and a whole lot of paperwork. I got to bed at four am then was up at seven to do ward rounds at the hospital. When, in that three hours' rest period, do you think it would have been appropriate to have a professional discourse? I'm sixty-three. How much sleep do you think I can live on?”

Julia felt a pang of insecurity. Her stomach did a weird flip, and she realised she was having doubts about the autopsy she had done. Could she have let her imagination run riot and come to a stupid conclusion? But what about the mark on Elizabeth's neck? And the spray pattern on the ceiling? And the absence of blood in Elizabeth's stomach? The thoughts were reeling in her mind. She didn't know what to say.

“Julia. Even though you're a top-drawer pathologist whom I respect, you're still human like all of us. We've all been so exposed to zany detective stories, TV programs, and Hollywood shlock. Isn't it just possible that you jumped the gun? Come on, admit it. You of all people, a trained forensic pathologist who's done more autopsies than I've had hot dinners—you should know better than this, Julia.”

“Howard, I—”



“Just a minute, Julia, I haven’t finished yet. Let me tell you a little story about a town called Hartlepool, near where I was born. During the Napoleonic wars, a French ship crashed on the rocks. The sole survivor was the ship’s mascot—a monkey. The local villagers hung the monkey as a French spy—true story, check it out if you don’t believe me. Now, if anyone asks if a person

came from Hartlepool, they usually get the response ‘No, they don’t hang monkeys where I come from’. Is that what you want for Dorset Creek? Do you want an alternative term for a ‘total fuck-up’ to be called a ‘Delaney’? Is this really how you want to be remembered? Don’t you agree your autopsy was just a little fanciful?” Kell paused. “I want you to take a week or two off. I’ll cover for you. Get yourself off to Port Douglas or Noosa for a holiday. Smell the roses. I’ll do some further tests on Rivers and have a confidential chat with some of my colleagues in Darwin. There’ll be a rational explanation for all of this, I assure you—but I guarantee it won’t be whatever you’re suggesting. Now, Julia, the waiting room’s overflowing. I don’t want to push you off the phone but I really have to get back to work.”

“Howard, the holiday can wait for a couple of weeks. I’m in the car park outside. I’ll come in and help. We can talk about this some more at lunchtime.”

“I won’t hear of it, Julia. Go. Take a couple of weeks off, full pay. I’ll sort it out with Amroc. Send me a postcard.”

Julia quickly thanked Kell before he hung up. That feeling in her stomach was still there. She’d been so wrong, and she couldn’t go

on holiday without making a token apology to the man she had just offended so badly.

She entered the surgery, smiling at the receptionists. Kell's door was open, and he was talking to someone. She didn't want to interrupt his conversation, so she waited outside. She couldn't help but overhear Kell's conversation. A shiver went down her spine as, spinning on her heels, she strode back out of the surgery.

"Aren't you seeing patients, Dr Delaney?"

"No. I'm taking a holiday. Dr Kell will see my patients."

She climbed into her car, realising that she was shaking.

Her holiday was going to have to wait. That house fire in Yarracoot was not a simple cigarette-related accident—that had now become obvious to her.

Two hours later, as she reached Yarracoot, she passed a row of old houses that all looked in good repair. Then she found the partial gap where the Stapleton house had once stood. Most of the left side of the house was intact, but the whole right side was just a charred mess. Outside were some firemen sifting through the wreckage.

"Dr Delaney, what are you doing here?" The smiling face of a young man in fluorescent plastic overalls had appeared in her window.

"Hello, Bert. How long have you been in Yarracoot?"

"This is my third week, Doc. I left Dorset Creek about a month ago. Did you know George Stapleton? Sad case. Looks like the silly twit fell asleep and dropped a cigarette on the couch—here today, gone tomorrow, and all that."

"Any suspicious circumstances, Bert?"

"You're joking, Doc. Why would there be anything suspicious? No accelerant residue, no signs of arson, just an accidental house fire. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Call it a woman's intuition. I just can't see how someone could accidentally set themselves on fire. I mean, why didn't the dog start barking and wake him up? Don't you think that's odd? We had a murder in Dorset Creek two days ago... Stapleton's death just seems strange, happening so soon afterwards."

"I'm a fireman, Doc. I see this all the time. Believe me, this was just a straightforward accident."

"Nothing weird about this at all?"

"Well, nothing about the fire, Doc. Bit odd that Lucky wasn't burnt, but that's all."

Julia frowned. "Lucky?"

"His dog. They were inseparable, I'm told. I thought dogs were supposed to stay by their masters through thick and thin. Maybe the dog was trying to get out the back door. Bit odd that he didn't try to jump through a window or something, though."

"Where's the dog now, Bert?"

"Vet took it. He was going to cremate him later today. That's an irony, don't you think, Doc?"

"It is, Bert. Which vet?"

Bert thought for a second. "I think it's the one on Murchison Street. Can't miss it. Two-level red house. Big sign outside."

"Thanks, Bert. Keep looking through the ashes, you never know what you'll find."

"Will do, Doc. Nice to see you again."

Julia drove off smiling. Before long, she arrived at the vet's surgery

"Here's Lucky, Dr Delaney. As you'll see, he's well-nourished. No sign of trauma. He was found just by the back door."

"Did he die of smoke inhalation?"

"Hard to say, but probably. The police didn't want an autopsy, obviously, and there were no suspicious circumstances, so they just asked me to cremate him."

“Julia ran her hands through Lucky’s fur. Suddenly, a small shiver went through her. Close to Lucky’s neck was a tiny bruise with a couple of drops of blood nearby.

“What do you make of that?” she asked the vet, showing him the injury. The vet put on his glasses and inspected the small lesion.

“Beats me. It’s haemorrhagic. If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was a funnel web spider bite, but that’s not possible—no funnel webs around here.”

Julia inspected the wound more carefully. It was exactly like the one Zeke Tandy had on his armpit. She snapped herself out of it. Not possible. That was crazy. But, then again...

“Could I borrow a magnifier, please?”

The vet handed her a large item that looked like a set of welder’s goggles—an illuminated stereo loupe, to both magnify and give a stereo image. She looked carefully at the dog’s small puncture wound from various angles. It seemed to have been made from a dart-shaped object. Subtle bleeding surrounded the puncture mark. Julia handed the loupe to the vet.

“It’s not a spider bite. This has been done with a needle or dart,” he said. “I don’t understand it, Dr Delaney. That means George Stapleton must have used some sort of spiked instrument on his dog. I knew him, and I’d never have thought he’d do a thing like that.”

“Someone else might have done it,” Julia said.

The vet’s forehead crumpled up as he thought about that. “Seems unlikely, though. There were no signs of a break-in. They were pretty certain everything was above board.”

“By the sounds of things, George Stapleton loved his dog. You can see from the bleeding that this is recent—probably within the past twelve hours or so. My guess is the dog received the injury around the time of the fire. Someone fired a dart at this dog as they broke into George Stapleton’s house.”

The vet looked confused at first, but then, as he thought about it more, realised that she was probably right—the facts certainly

supported her. “You do realise what you’re implying, Doctor? If you’re right, this accident is now arson and murder. And—well, that kind of thing just doesn’t happen in Yarracoot.”

“I’m not implying anything. Just quoting what’s scientifically correct. The dog has a wound. It’s consistent with a dart. There’s bruising around the wound site and that suggests whatever caused the injury had a property that caused microcapillary bleeding. *Ipso facto*, someone shot the dog with a dart.” Julia paused, wondering how much information she should share with this man. “What if I told you that I performed an autopsy on a murdered woman not long ago who had exactly that same injury on her chest, and that someone else who was at the murder scene had a similar wound on his right armpit? Would that seem interesting to you?”

The vet, frankly, looked even more confused. “But—”

Julia interrupted him quickly. “Could I ask you for a big favour?”

“Well, of course you can. This is far more interesting than giving a cat worming tablets or trying to psychoanalyse a budgie that’s stopped talking.”

“How would you feel about performing an autopsy on the dog? I’ll bet you’ll find the injury is six millimetres deep, and I’ll also wager that you won’t find any trace of smoke in the lungs. The dog will have been dead before the fire started.”

“Oh—an autopsy on the dog? The police just wanted a cremation. I’ve got two spayings and some cows to vaccinate, and they’re way out of town. Couldn’t have asked on a worse day.”

Julia didn’t say a word. She just cocked her pretty head to one side, letting her strawberry-blonde hair sway.

The vet melted. They always did. “Okay, Doctor. I suppose I should do my bit of *pro bono*. How about later tonight?”

Julia smiled sweetly. “Well, if we could do it right now, I could help you—and that would mean you wouldn’t have any problems contacting me later. Why don’t we just get to work while things are fresh in our minds?”

The vet, shrugging, agreed.

They placed the dog on the veterinary operating table and Julia, who had virtually taken over by that point, excised a piece of tissue with an approximately one-inch diameter surrounding the dart site. She expertly made a vertical incision down the tract and opened up the wound, while the vet just watched on. She took swabs and small samples of tissue, inspecting them under the vet's microscope. She pointed out to the vet the tell-tale signs of a hollow dart that entered the skin and then forced liquid into the surrounding tissue. Burst capillaries abounded, suggesting the liquid had come out of the dart at high velocity, unlike a tranquilliser dart, where the liquid would have entered the skin very slowly. Since the wound tract was only six millimetres long, the dart must have been precision engineered. Such high pressure in something so small requires very special metals, internally polished to a mirror-like finish to reduce resistance to fluid flow, made in highly sophisticated manufacturing facilities. This was no amateur equipment.

Sixty minutes later, Julia had the dog's heart, liver, brain, bladder, and lungs on the dissection slab.

"Look here," she said. "The right and left bronchi, the trachea, the bronchioles—none of them have any smoke residue. The dog was dead prior to the fire. Would you agree?"

The vet just humbly nodded and grunted a "yes". He was beginning to feel both superfluous and inadequate. He'd never have been able to do an autopsy so well, or so quickly.



“Look also at how the left ventricle has stopped in systole. That suggests the potassium levels suddenly rose, causing the myocardium to go into terminal spasm.”

The vet hadn’t noticed that fact, but when it was pointed out, recalled from veterinary school that when potassium levels are too high, the ventricles contract and don’t relax. Postmortem, they are empty, unlike ventricles that stopped in a relaxed state and are then engorged with blood.

Julia continued: “So, whatever toxin was used caused the body to suddenly develop rapid hyperkalaemia.”

“You mean a mixture of potassium and digoxin,” he said, trying to sound like he was following her perfectly.

Julia shook her head slightly. “No, I doubt that. It would take digoxin and potassium way too long to act. Besides, there’d have to be a large volume, and there’s no way that could be delivered via a subcutaneous delivery system. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The vet agreed, making a mental note to just nod his head and say “yes” in future.

Julia really didn’t care whether he agreed or not. Her mind was racing and dredging through old text books, lectures and medical videos as she thought aloud. “No, this toxin, whatever it was, caused the body to suddenly raise the serum potassium. I’ve seen something like this before, I just can’t remember where...”

She pulled back from the table to give herself time to think, to remember. Taking in her surroundings for the first time, she looked around the room, forcing her mind to go into a reprieved state of calmness. It was an old room with a large bay window at one end, showing a view of what had once been a compact garden area boasting a small pond. The inevitable fishing garden gnome was perched on the edge, next to an equal-sized ceramic tortoise, both long overdue for a paint job. Ceramic tortoise... marine creature... marine creatures... marine deaths... marine toxins... At the same

time they came into view, her mind leapt forward and she gave an involuntary cry of excitement.

"I remember! Cone shell toxin! If you recall, it has both neurotoxin *and* cardiotoxin. Thought to work almost immediately. The neurotoxin had the capability of causing instant paralysis and the cardiotoxin would kill the would-be victim later on. If I remember correctly, it has the potential to be the most rapid incapacitating agent known, and it could render someone unconscious in a couple of seconds and kill in a few minutes if an antidote wasn't given." Julia paused to think. "A huge amount of work would have been needed to refine and concentrate it. This is something that only a very well-financed and fully equipped laboratory could achieve. It's not the kind of thing that could be done in a meth kitchen—we're talking big money here."

The vet simply nodded. "Well, doctor, if that's the case, then shouldn't we be handing this over to the police?"

The vet might have wanted more interest in his life than worming dogs and talking to budgies, but now he felt his mouth going dry and heart speeding up. This situation was well into the "heavy" category. His bravery didn't extend to getting involved with murderers who had sophisticated nerve agents at their disposal. Yet, here was this gorgeous woman, who was totally relaxed, competent, and committed, completely focused. He couldn't help but feel a little ashamed of himself.

Delaney didn't seem to take note of his question and carried on staring down the microscope. Cone shell toxin... She'd have to check her facts, of course, but she knew intuitively that she was right. The same person who had killed Elizabeth Rivers had killed George Stapleton. He'd come to the door, Stapleton would have opened it a crack, the dog would have started growling, and the assailant had shot the dog, probably kicked in the door, and done his deed on the hapless occupant. There'd possibly be some sign of trauma to the burnt corpse and the door might show signs of split wood around

the lock. The killer would have had to drag the unconscious body to the couch and either clubbed him or used a weapon. Julia's mind was racing, trying to put herself in the picture, thinking how she would have done it. She could almost visualise the killer's movements.

"Dr Delaney?" The vet spoke again, a little louder this time, and Julia snapped out of her virtual world.

"Yes?"

"Shouldn't we call the police? I mean, if there's a murderer out there, we ought to do something quickly. And, well—" the vet gulped, "don't you think it's possible that this person—this murderer—might be watching you? And me? I mean, mightn't someone like that want to keep his work *private*?"

Delaney realised she had to reassure the vet or risk him freaking out even more. "I wouldn't worry about that. He's long gone—this person is likely to be a true professional. He has a sophisticated weapon. He would find his target, do the job, and get as clear as he can from the area. He's not going to hang around. He'd stand out like a sore thumb in a small town like this." She paused. "You're not a haemophiliac, by the way, are you?"

"No..."

"Well, you've nothing to worry about. This man seems to be only after haemophiliacs."

Julia thought back to her mentor and professor, Alan Usher, who was the head of forensic pathology at the Bethesda Medical Centre. Although he was a physician and pathologist, he was, by nature, a sleuth of Sherlock Holmes' capability. He had an abiding hatred of the term "coincidence". It was a word he would have happily excised from the English language.

If you assume there is no such thing as a coincidence and work under the assumption that obfuscation and deceit are the real impediments in a crime scenario, you won't often be wrong.

Julia worshipped Professor Alan Usher. Even while was studying and was under a huge amount of pressure academically, she would

have crawled over broken glass and hot coals to watch his autopsies, hear his wise words, and seek his counsel. Usher would often arrive at the correct conclusion as to the perpetrator of a crime simply from the police notes and the crime scene. Time and time again, police officials from other administrations would implore Usher to assist them with difficult cases, but Usher steadfastly refused. He knew he could easily have his life swamped with police investigations, but that would have taken him away from the real love of his life: pathology and teaching.

Julia closed her eyes as she remembered. She had been the obvious choice as his successor. Then, Julia's fiancée, who was also a senior doctor at Bethesda, had decided that one beautiful woman wasn't enough.

It was by chance that she was looking through a New England Journal of Medicine magazine and, in the "Situations Vacant" section, noticed an opening for a family physician in outback Australia, in a town that had strong ties to the United States, where nearly all the inhabitants were employed by Amroc.

Just like the early twentieth century had the French Foreign Legion *Pour Oublier* for disgruntled and heartbroken men, so Julia had thought a year in the Australian outback would be good therapy. She'd do her year or two in Australia; she'd stay away from all men; she'd work hard and excise her demons. The town of Dorset Creek seemed perfect, and Howard Kell had been genuinely thrilled to have a doctor with her exceptional qualifications.

Julia realised she was letting her concentration lapse and snapped herself back to the task at hand. Two haemophiliacs dead. A coincidence? No way on earth, as far as she was concerned. Two deaths in such a short space of time almost certainly meant other deaths, too. There would be about seventy haemophiliacs in the Northern Territory.

Was Amroc the other common factor? The murderer had state of the art equipment. He seemed to have accurate information about who to target, and when. Was that just good fortune?

Julia decided that she had to present this information to Superintendent Vickers and hope he'd see the logic. She'd have to go carefully, though—Vickers was a tough Aussie outback cop. He probably wouldn't take kindly to having his job usurped, and especially not by her. She'd present the facts to him, see if he made the associations—and if he didn't, then she'd give him her opinions. If he dug his heels in and didn't take it any further, she'd go over his head and send emails to the local media outlets.

Julia thanked the vet profusely for his help and left, heading back to Dorset Creek.



CHAPTER TWENTY

“Superintendent Vickers? Julia Delaney here. I thought we could get together for a chat. I have some interesting information about the Rivers’ murder.”

“Ah, Doctor. Nice to speak to you. Fire away.”

Julia paused. “I think we should meet in person, superintendent. The information I have is somewhat sensitive.”

“That’s fine, Doctor. Why don’t we meet at the Victory for lunch? You do enjoy an occasional drink, I hope?”

Julia grinned. She wasn’t much of a pub person, but she was willing to make an exception in this case. “Of course, I love a drink and a chat. Maybe just you and me.”

“See you at the Victory at 12:30 pm, Dr Delaney.”

Julia smiled to herself. *I’ll have him eating out of my hand in five minutes.*

As Vickers put the phone down, Ward asked, “Who was that, Boss?”

“That, Ward, was the very charming Dr Julia Delaney. She wants to meet me, one-on-one, in person.” He grinned. “I reckon she’s up to something. Have you got the PearlCorder with you?”

“Yes, sir, and the tie pin mic. It’s got at least two hours left on the card. Will that be enough?”

“Easily, Wardy. If it isn’t, I’ll slip off to the toilet and put a new card in. I wonder what she’s up to. She sounded like she wanted to tell me something special. It’d be one for the books if she was the Rivers killer.” He sniggered, trying to imagine that.

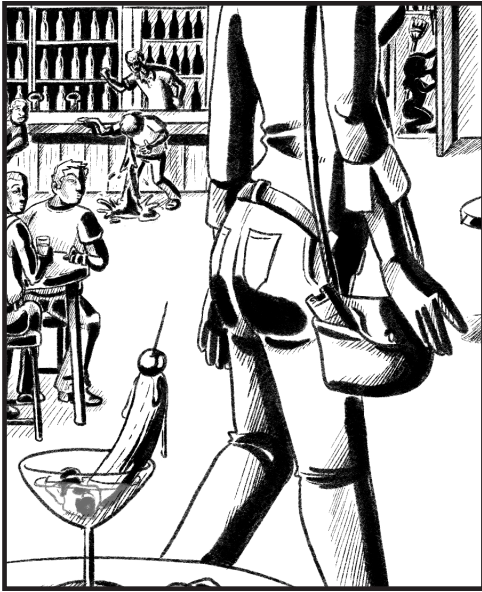
“Nah, boss. No way. She’s no killer. Too attractive. Tasty ladies like that don’t kill other women—you know that.”

“Always pays to keep an open mind Wardy. Never forget that.”

“Will do boss. And remember: Look, but don’t touch. We don’t want a repetition of what happened in Darwin two years ago.”

Vickers raised his eyebrows. He definitely didn’t want a repetition of what happened in Darwin two years ago. Had Ward not come to his assistance and given a false statement regarding the young lady—a witness to a robbery—who Superintendent Vickers had become emotionally involved with, he might have ended up as Sergeant Vickers. Vickers always had a problem keeping his dick tucked away in his pants.

Vickers, early to the scene as usual, was settling down to his second scotch when he noticed Dr Delaney arrive. He took in the gentle sway of her walk, the proud but not arrogant bearing, and the simple but elegant clothing. It was clothing that didn’t make a fashion statement as such, but showed careful selection and good taste.



“Dr Delaney. I was beginning to think you weren’t going to turn up.” In fact, Julia was early, but Vickers liked to use this ploy to put potential witnesses and suspects on the defensive.

Julia, however, simply let the remark pass and greeted Vickers with a friendly smile and firm handshake.

“So, what have you got for me, Doctor? It sounded

quite important over the phone. I’m only a simple country cop—I hope it’s not too complicated.” He shot her a cheeky smile.

“Somehow, I think you’re doing yourself an injustice, Superintendent. I have it on good authority you’re the Northern Territory’s best detective.” Julia paused, giving Vickers a slight smile. “Now, this all sounds a bit strange, Superintendent, and I didn’t know if I should speak to you or possibly write out a report and send it to your head office.”

Vickers simply nodded.

“Well, Superintendent. You must be at least a little confused. You turn up at a small outback town where a murder has been committed, and one doctor says there’s a crazy murderer stealing blood, while another doctor says something entirely different. You’re a police officer. You rely on expert advice, yet here you are just getting conflicting reports. I wouldn’t want to be in your position.”

Vickers’ eyes prompted Julia to carry on.

“So, please tell me. Did you speak to Dr Kell?”

Vickers decided it was pointless trying to con the young lady. Kell had said she was unbalanced, but there was no sign of that here. She seemed eminently sensible. No babbling, good eye fixation, relaxed body language in all respects.

“Kell said you’ve been under a lot of strain, that you’ve made some irrational medical decisions recently. He said you’ve been behaving oddly and that is the reason you came up with what he describes as a ludicrous autopsy report. He says that to save your reputation, he performed an autopsy himself, and that autopsy one hundred per cent established the Rivers girl died of a heart attack due to the stress of the situation she found herself in.”

“I see. And what do you think, Superintendent?”

“You seem a sensible young lady. You’re well qualified and you seem quite rational at the moment, but what’s to say you don’t alternate between moments of lucidity and madness?”

“Fair question, Superintendent.” She paused. “Let’s just say that I am crazy. Suppose I could present to you a series of facts—points that are irrefutable. Whether I’m crazy or not would be irrelevant, wouldn’t you agree?”

Vickers nodded.

“The Rivers girl had a small puncture wound near her left breast. Fact. Zane Tandy had a puncture wound that was identical. Fact. Zane Tandy was poleaxed by the assailant—or so he says. Elizabeth Rivers was a haemophiliac. Fact. One hundred kilometres away in Yarracoot, a man was burnt to death—George Stapleton. Fact. Although the body was burnt beyond recognition, his dog, which was near the back door, was intact and also had a puncture mark on its back, identical to those on Zeke Tandy and the Rivers girl. Fact. What more do you want, Superintendent—the business card of whoever is doing this?”

Vickers simply sat, not quite smiling, watching the young doctor’s chest heave in and out as her oratory became a crescendo. He had been

just the same when he was young. Passionate, indignant, zealous... full of youthful energy. This young woman could have been a detective. She had the gift. The intuition. The all-powerful enthusiasm.

"I'm quite impressed, Doctor. You make a good case and present it well. I think I can turn this off now." Vickers pulled out the small digital recorder and pressed the Off button.

Julia didn't even seem that surprised. She just inclined her head towards Vickers.

Vickers continued: "Let's get down to business. I buy your story. There's a murderer. I accept that. I even partly buy the blood-letting, although you'll agree it all sounds quite unlikely."

Julia nodded.

"So why would anyone do that? It's obvious this murderer has some sort of backup and expensive weaponry. He's not some crazy nutcase going around satisfying his sexual fantasies or something. He needs the blood. It's been put in some sort of container and taken away from the scene."

"That's why the alcohol swab intrigued me. Whoever is taking the blood is intent on preventing bacteria from spoiling the blood."



"Any ideas why Kell tried to rubbish your diagnosis?"

Julia pursed her lips. "I had a chat of sorts with him. It sounded like he was genuinely trying to save me 'from myself'. For a while I reflected on it all and wondered if maybe I was making stupid assumptions. I went into the surgery to apologise, face to face. When I walked over to his office, I accidentally overheard him

having a conversation with someone on the phone. He said, 'I think there might be a problem with her. I'm not sure if she's bought the story. She's nobody's fool.'" She paused. "He was talking quietly, but I'm sure I heard him correctly. I wouldn't bring this to you if I wasn't absolutely sure of it."

Frank stared at Julia for a few minutes. "I'll have a chat with the good Dr Kell. Shall we meet up again later today?"

"I would appreciate that."

Vickers postponed lunch, excused himself, and headed back to the surgery to speak with Kell as soon as possible.

After the statutory twenty-minute wait, Kell came out to greet him, almost beaming.

"Superintendent Vickers. Good to see you again."

"Thanks for seeing me, Dr Kell. I just need to clarify one or two things, if that's okay."

"Absolutely, Superintendent. Anything I can do to help."

"After you spoke to Dr Delaney earlier today, I believe you had a phone conversation with someone else shortly afterwards. May I ask who?"

Kell frowned slightly. "I make scores of phone calls every day. I don't think I could remember."

"I have it on good authority that just after you spoke to Julia, you were overheard saying something like, 'There's a problem with her. I'm not sure if she's bought the story. She's nobody's fool.'"

Vickers watched carefully for a flicker of emotion, but he didn't see anything. No evasive movements of the eyes, no rapid movements of the belly, no dilatation of the pupils. Either Kell wasn't guilty about anything or he was one hell of a cool customer.

Kell scratched his chin, thinking. "Well, I did have a talk with a patient's relative earlier today, although I'm not exactly sure when it

was. Sometimes I don't give patients the full story if I think they're unlikely to handle it well, especially when it's over the phone and not in person. I do recall speaking to a dying patient's husband and explaining to him that I didn't think his wife believed me when I told her things were going to be all right. As for whispering—I whisper all the time when the door's open. How could any discreet doctor do otherwise?"

Vickers narrowed his eyes, considering what he'd just heard. The explanation that Kell had offered did make sense. He wanted to believe Julia, but realised the reason for this might well be because he fancied her.

So here he was—back to square one. Back to deciding whether there was anything to the murder theory or not. Damn it to hell.

The Victory Hotel was right in the centre of Dorset Creek, where any good pub should be, according to Vickers. Yet it was unlikely to be his favourite watering hole for the duration of his stay—there was a distinct American flavour to the décor of the newly renovated Victory, and Vickers couldn't get used to it. Outside the hotel, there was a filling station that sold "gasoline" instead of "petrol". This Americanisation of Australia grated with Vickers.

Even so, the Victory was convenient for the police station, and a natural place to take a few minutes R&R from his rather poky office.

Large TV monitors mounted high in the corners beamed down the Sky Channel. Coasters bearing the Amroc insignia were on every table.

One end of the bar belonged to Sergeant Bell. Nobody else stood in his spot, not even when the town cop wasn't there. Now he leaned on the bar, with Frank Vickers sitting on a bar stool beside him, while the locals kept their distance. Bell was drinking neat scotch followed by beer chasers.

“What brand of scotch is that?” Vickers queried, a tall, cold glass of Coopers Ale in his hand.

“Talisker,” Bell replied. “From the Isle of Skye. They get it in especially for me.”

And you pay full price for it?” Vickers said with a wry smile.

Bell smiled back and shrugged. “There are a few perks that come with the job.”

“At least you’re drinking a man’s drink.

Vickers grinned. “So, Tom, do you reckon Nicholls did it?”

“Murdered Beth Rivers?” Bell shook his head. “I wouldn’t have said so. Something like that’s not in him. Bastia and his mates seem to fit the frame from where I look at it. I’m glad it’s your lot at the CIB’s problem. I don’t know what to believe at the moment.”

“Ever had any trouble with Bastia or his cronies in Dorset Creek before?”

“Nothing serious.”

“Ever had a case here where a woman’s been tied up with tape?”

“No.”

“Anything about the way she died give you any clues?”

Bell slowly shook his head. “It’s all new ground as far as I’m concerned, Frank.”

As the sergeant spoke, one of his men came into the bar. Constable Steve Duggan joined them.

“How goes it, Constable?” Vickers said in greeting. “What’ll you have?”

“Gee, thanks, sir. A Coopers would go down well. Thanks.” He was a little in awe of the CIB superintendent.

“A Coopers for the hard-working constable, please.” Vickers called to the barmaid, who nodded an acknowledgement.

“Actually, sir, there was something I remembered last night that I thought you and Sergeant Bell might want to know about.”

Vickers nodded. “Let’s have it then, son,” he said.

“Well, sir,” Duggan began, “when I was bringing Laurie Bastia and his two mates back to town, a brown VW Transporter passed us, heading out of town, for the Stuart Highway.”

“Did it indeed?” Vickers replied with interest. “Did you see who was in it?”

“Only one male driver that I could see, sir.”

“What’d he look like?” Bell asked.

Duggan turned to his sergeant. “He was only in my lights for a couple of seconds, Boss.”

“Was he black, white, Asian? And have you ever seen this van in the region before?”

“The reason I even noted it was because I’ve never seen a VW Transporter anywhere in the NT. They’re not popular here. Water-cooled, you see. The original ones were air-cooled and did well in hot climates. These newer ones blow cylinder head gaskets. They’re probably okay in Melbourne, but a strange choice for the Territory. Had it been a Toyota or a Kia I wouldn’t even have bothered remembering it.”

“And what did he look like?”

“Definitely European-looking, but I couldn’t describe him, sir. Not really young and not old, maybe in the thirty to fifty bracket. He was driving well and did all the right things. From experience, I’d say he was probably closer to thirty-five. Old geezers usually don’t drive so well when a car’s approaching. It all happened so fast, and he was sort of just there one moment in my headlights, and gone the next. I don’t reckon I’d know him if I saw him again.” Duggan wore a pained expression. “Sorry, sir.”

“That’s alright, Steve,” said Vickers, patting him on the back. “You did well to remember as much as you did. And there was just the driver in the VW’s cab?”

“As far as I could see. Sorry I can’t give you any more. I do recall that the van had NT plates and that’s why I thought it was strange. Someone must have either bought the car here or brought it up from

another state and registered it here. Crazy, if you ask me, to have that van in the NT.”

“Constable, you’ve put another piece in the puzzle for us. I don’t like coincidences. I’ll look into this further.”

“Wardy,” Vickers called to Ward, who had just entered the hotel, “get someone on to checking out the van—Steve, tell Wardy about it. I want to know who owned it and what they were doing here. Steve, you’re going to be a famous detective one day. You’ll probably end up my boss. Drink up, you deserve it.”



CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

“Bill, it’s Frank Vickers. I’m down at Dorset Creek. I’ve got a hot one for you.” Vickers was sitting comfortably in the small office set up for him just off the incident room. A cup of freshly brewed coffee was in front of him with the remains of a particularly good chocolate muffin. “I need some fast work. Can you get a court order for medical records? I do believe we’ve got some crazy cunt down here killing haemophiliacs. I need a list of all haemophiliacs in the Northern Territory from the Red Cross. You could probably get it all sorted within the next hour or two. Really top priority.”

He was speaking to his old friend Bill, who just happened to be the deputy commissioner.

“Frank, Frank. Hold your horses, man. Just give me the whole story and start at the beginning.” Willem Forster sounded a little tired and edgy. Vickers had decided years ago that this came from too much money and too few things to spend it on.

Vickers explained all about the two deaths and the two doctors’ conflicting reports, and how he accepted Dr Delaney’s version.

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. "I'm not convinced, Frank. It sounds like the lady doctor is a bit crazy. I think I prefer the other doctor's report. Can you imagine what wankers we'll look like if this is a beat-up? You and I'll be kissing our pensions goodbye. I'd suggest you wait a little while and just concentrate on the Dorset Creek death. You'll see. It'll turn out to be a straightforward accidental killing. Yeah, for sure. That lady doctor sounds like she's been watching too many movies." Another pause. "Now, listen, I'm going to ask you to back off, Frank. You know I'll always back you up, but not this time. It's just too far-fetched."

Vickers idly picked at the last few crumbs of the muffin before deciding to carry on. "Bill, I'm telling you. She's on to something. You know me. How often do I get led astray? We've got to act quickly, before someone else gets killed. I'm serious, Bill. I've got to insist."

The response was affable, but firm. "And Frank, I've got to insist otherwise. I don't want to seem like I'm pulling rank on you, but I've got to make this official. No court order for haemophiliacs. No running around after bloodthirsty murderers. That's my final word on the subject. You'll thank me for this in the future."

Vickers paused for a moment, then said, "Yes, sir."

"Frank, you're sulking. That's not like you."

Vickers sat up straight. "Bill, I've never had such a strong feeling before—"

Forster interrupted him. "Frank, for the last time, I'm not going to take any of this crap. You're sounding like a schoolboy. I've got a mass of work to do and a meeting with His Nibs next door in five minutes. Can't talk any longer. Come round next Friday night and we'll get wrecked. Got to go. Bye." And with that final word, Forster hung up.

This was the man Frank would see often for snooker and whisky. They watched porno movies together and talked about their female conquests. Vickers was stunned. Why was Forster digging his heels in? He put the phone down, feeling crestfallen.



Maybe he'd been too charmed by Delaney. Maybe she was crazy and had distorted the facts to fit her own purposes. After all, Forster was a good guy—he probably was just being logical and practical.

Maybe Vickers did need pulling back to sanity. Granted, he was a sucker for a smile from a lovely lady. And this lovely lady sure knew how to pack a punch with her smile.



CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The hands on her watch overlapped, pointing straight up, as Dorit Gazal parked the white 2013 Toyota Hiace truck in the street beside a grandstand of the Junction Oval, a local football stadium. It was noon, the meeting time she had arranged with Kroeger. She wound down the windows. It was warm and dry, and a breath of breeze was welcome. She got out, went around the vehicle, and sat in the passenger seat.

Within a minute the driver's door opened and Kroeger climbed in.

"Are today's jobs on?" he asked, his eyes on the deserted street ahead.

She nodded. "They check out fine."

"No dogs?"

"No dogs," she affirmed. She slipped him two pieces of paper. One side of each contained a map of the location of the target. On the reverse side, there was a map of the location for a rendezvous with Bradley and his van after each job. "The first subject is Raymond Dale. He's fifty-six."

"The one you told me about last night?"

"Yes."

"And tonight?"

"Johnnie Dawson. Thirty-five. Vocalist with a country music band. The band only just got back from a gig at Weipa. He's planning to catch up on some sleep tonight, so he should be alone. A non-smoker. He lives on his own in a motor home on a remote five-acre block covered in trees out in the country. He has a mobile phone only. No pets. No current girlfriend. He would be perfect for complete removal."

"All right. Is everything in the back?"

"All there. Are you planning to use the fire option?"

Kroeger nodded. "For the afternoon job."

"You do appreciate there hasn't been time to customise this van? There was only time for Faranelli to check the motor, brakes, and steering."

"It'll do. On your way. You'll find the Land Cruiser in the parking lot around the corner behind us." He handed her a set of car keys. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay." She stepped out into the sunlight and walked away without a backward glance.

Surrounded by twenty-foot-tall palm trees, the ten-year-old house was built in the typical Territory style, in weatherboard and set high on stilts to permit the air to circulate beneath it. As Kroeger approached, he saw that the weatherboard had recently been sanded back. Black medical bag in his left hand, Kroeger climbed the front steps and rang the doorbell.

The door was opened by a middle-aged man with thick grey hair and the height and build of a jockey. He smiled. "G'day. What can I do you for?"

“Mr Raymond Dale?” Kroeger asked.

“That’s me.”

“Good afternoon. I’m Dr Hardigger of the Department of Health. I would like to speak to you about your haemophilia. We are conducting a confidential study. May I come in?”

Dale looked him up and down, taking in the black medical bag in his hand. “Oh. Fine. Come on in.” He opened the door wide and allowed Kroeger to enter, then closed the door again.

“After you, Mr Dale,” said Kroeger once he had stepped into the front hallway, standing back and gesturing for the man to proceed ahead of him.

“Right you are.” Dale turned and began to lead the way towards the living room, talking as he went. “I’m turning out to be real popular all of a sudden. I had a call this morning from a medical researcher asking about my health. And last night this nice research girl from Sydney called, doing a survey about safety in the home, and now you. I’ve just had my lunch, but I was about to put the kettle on. Can I make you a cup of—”



Kroeger had taken the dart gun from his trouser pocket. Now, two paces behind Ray Dale, he pointed it at his back and fired. *Crack!* The dart shot through the air and caught Dale just below the shoulder blades. The target stopped in mid-sentence, involuntarily threw his arms in the air, and fell forward on his face in the living room doorway.

Kroeger set down his bag and removed his dark glasses, folding them and slipping them

into his shirt pocket. After donning his surgical gloves, he bent over the motionless figure and found a steady pulse. Dale was taped in seconds. Kroeger stepped over the prone figure and passed into the living room. The décor betrayed a female touch. An air conditioner installed high in one exterior wall hummed as it circulated welcome cool air around the room. The near-new widescreen plasma television set was on; a raunchy female vocalist was singing “River Deep, Mountain High”.

Kroeger closed the venetian blinds; the slats rattled against each other. He walked to the TV and flicked it off, muting the hard-working vocalist mid-verse. The room was suddenly silent but for the relentless oscillating hum of the air conditioner. Then, returning to Dale’s still form, he dragged him into the living room then lifted him effortlessly onto the couch. The small man weighed next to nothing. Wondering whether Dale’s body would hold a full eight pints, he swabbed the man’s bony neck, inserted the cannula, set up the IV, attached the receptacle and the vacuum pump, and turned on the pump. Then he prepared a syringe with pancuronium.

While he was waiting for the effects of the neurotoxin to wear off, he went into the adjoining kitchen, locked the back door, and closed the kitchen’s venetian blinds. He noticed a pink sticky note on the kitchen bench; there were three words written on it in a small, neat, feminine hand: “Chase up painters”.

Kroeger returned to the living room and took a seat in an armchair opposite his victim. When Dale showed signs of coming round, Kroeger knelt beside him and began the process of injecting the pancuronium. As Ray Dale lay paralysed and bleeding to death, Kroeger again took a seat in the armchair. He picked up a European holiday brochure that lay on a glass-topped coffee table and began to read. He was taking in the sights of holidays in Italy when the doorbell rang.

Lowering the brochure, he sat perfectly still. Again, the doorbell rang. Kroeger could hear voices outside the front door—two or more

men were talking. The doorbell rang a third time. Then, silence. Kroeger continued to sit, unmoving, his ears pricked, his muscles tensing, like an animal of the jungle preparing to pounce.

Something rattled against the exterior wall of the house, just outside the living room. Still, Kroeger did not move. There was another clattering rattle beside the living room window. Then, voices again: loud, Australian accents and laughter. Kroeger listened as two men talked.

Their firm had been engaged to repaint the Dale house, it seemed, weeks or months before. One member of their team had started work on the house but left the job unfinished. Ray Dale had called the painting firm that morning, complaining about the long delay, and they had dropped everything to finish the job.

It was obvious the painters would be there for the day. Kroeger would have to rule out the fire option for now. Even if he could slip out of the house without the painters noticing him, they would quickly spot a fire and call the fire brigade. They might even haul Ray Dale's body from the house before the flames had eradicated all evidence of the true cause of death.

To be on the safe side, Kroeger would have to remain in the house until the painters left, even if it meant waiting until nightfall. If Dale's wife returned in the meantime, he would eliminate her.

Deciding the heart attack option offered the best solution, he took a Taser from the medical bag and slipped it into a trouser pocket, just in case.

A packet of cigarettes and a box of matches lay on the coffee table. Kroeger would have preferred Dale used a gas lighter; it would have suited his requirements nicely. He went in search of a suitable alternative. As if in slow motion, he crossed the room, taking a step, then stopping, listening for any falter in the background noise of the painters' gossip and banter, then he took another step... When he reached the kitchen drawers, he opened them one at a time, slowly, gently sliding them out, then studying the contents. In the bottom

drawer he found something that would serve his purpose: a small electric soldering iron and coiled extension lead.

Back in the living room, with the soldering iron plugged in ready for use, he sat back down in an armchair and resumed reading the holiday brochure.

Outside, the two house painters worked away, chattering and guffawing like schoolboys, oblivious to the murder taking place just a thin wall and a few steps away.



Forty minutes after he had begun extracting blood from Ray Dale, Kroeger checked his victim. The blood was still flowing. The contents of the plastic blood container were approaching the four-pint mark. Ray Dale's heart was doing a particularly efficient job.

Kroeger waited another ten minutes; when he checked again, the bleeding had ceased.

Raymond Dale's heart had

stopped. Kroeger turned off the vacuum pump and removed the grey tape. Then he extracted the cannula carefully and packed all his equipment away in the bag. Slowly crossing to the power socket, he switched the power on, then returned to the couch, knelt down, picked up the soldering iron, and waited for it to heat up. Three minutes later, he placed the tip on the entry wound on the side of Ray Dale's neck. Within seconds it was effectively cauterised.

With careful steps he returned the lead to the kitchen drawer where he had found it. Nothing must be out of place when Dale's wife came home. Nothing. But the tip of the soldering iron was covered in Ray Dale's flesh and blood. Rather than try to wash it clean here,

he decided to take it with him. Warily, he returned to the living room and slipped the soldering iron into his bag.

Outside, as one of the painters was painting around the window, he told a joke to his colleague. "What did the cyclone say to the coconut tree?"

"What?" the other responded.

"Hang onto your nuts, I'm gunna give you a blow job you'll never forget."

The pair of them cracked up with laughter.

Inside the house, Kroeger took out black leather gloves and a folded canvas bag, stripped off the surgical gloves and returned them to the bag, then pulled on the leather gloves. Unfolding the canvas bag, he slipped the medical bag into it then pulled the cords tight to close the neck. The bag had acted as his credentials earlier, but carrying it through the streets on his way back to the Toyota Hiace would only invite unnecessary attention.

Pulling the body into a sitting position, he arranged it so it appeared the victim had been watching TV when a heart attack struck him. As a final macabre touch, Kroeger opened the holiday brochure at the section on the Amalfi Coast and the Isle of Capri, then placed it in the dead man's right hand and closed the thumb and forefinger over it. It looked as if Ray Dale had died with thoughts of a trip to Italy on his mind.

Then Kroeger resumed his seat and waited for the time to pass.

At 3:50 pm, the painters began packing up. By four, they were gone. Kroeger switched the television set back on, leaving a children's program blaring. Then he put on his dark glasses, took up the canvas bag, and slipped out the back door and into the sunlight.



CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Vickers sat at his desk drumming his fingers. It was not a normal activity for him. When doing any deep thinking, he preferred to pace, but the cramped little room gave him no opportunity for that, so his fingers were doing the walking. As the jingle came into his mind he reached for the telephone. He had enjoyed his meetings with the delicious Dr Delaney, but he had a feeling his report of failure to her would curb any further meetings. He looked at his watch as he heard the dialling tone. She would probably be busy, but he couldn't put the call off any longer. He felt unaccustomed delight as her voice came on the line. She was crisply professional.

"Julia. Excuse the interruption. I wanted to let you know that I won't be able to do anything more about the haemophiliac situation. My boss has put a clammer on it. I tried to get him interested—anyway, there's nothing more I can do. I'm sorry—I tried my best."

Julia was silent for a moment. "Oh, yes. Right then, Superintendent, I'll let you get on and follow your boss's orders. Good day."

A little surprised at her response, Vickers muttered, “Yeah, look, sorry again.” If there had been a hole close by, Vickers would gladly have crawled into it. About to hang the phone up, he heard Julia say, “Oh, Superintendent. One final thing. A Mr Ray Dale, who lived in Mowbray, just died of an apparent heart attack.”

“So?”

“He was a haemophiliac. That’s three haemophiliac deaths in three days, but, like you say. It’s probably for the best that we just let things slide.”

Mouth wide open, he heard the click of the receiver and then the telephone’s disconnect tone. One hour and he’d had the phone hung up on him twice—once by an old friend who was behaving out of character, and once by a doctor who Vickers was a tad too fond of.

He pushed the button for redial, but was told by the receptionist she was busy seeing patients.

Still with the phone in his hand and the amazed expression on his face, he spat out the words “Oh, god, fuck me sideways.”

Vickers went straight to Delaney’s office, somewhat sheepishly.

“Can I see Dr Delaney, please?” Vickers asked the clearly busy receptionist. “I’m Superintendent Vickers, Northern Territory Police.” The receptionist stiffened up slightly and her irritated appearance gave way to one of greater deference. Vickers saw this often and, truth be told, liked the effect his station had on people.

“Of course, sir. I’ll call her right away. Please take a seat.”

The receptionist got on the phone and called Dr Delaney, who said she’d be right out.

Right out ended up being half an hour.

“Superintendent Vickers. How nice of you to come round, and so quickly.” Delaney had a slightly gloating and triumphant tone, not lost on Vickers.

“Could we speak in your office, Dr Delaney?”

“You’ll have to hang on a while. Patients to see.”

Vickers nodded. A while turned out to be more than an hour. Vickers was about to leave when Delaney came out and with an almost gracious air, apologised profusely and shepherded Vickers into her office.

“So, I grabbed your interest, did I? I had a feeling you’d be over, although I was hoping there’d be lights and sirens.”

“Was it necessary to punish me by making me wait over an hour, Julia? I am on the side of the good guys. I’m not your enemy, you know.”

“Sorry, Superintendent,” she said coldly, “but someone else is dead. It’s murder. You know it and I know it. If you’d have gotten off your ass and done something a little quicker, maybe a life would have been saved. Am I supposed to give you the murderer’s name, address, and telephone number?”

“Well, it would help to speed up police enquiries. We police are not supposed to be mental giants, are we?” Vickers said lightly. “And while you’re at it, tell me how a heart attack can be faked medically.”

“I could think of twenty different ways I could make a death look like a heart attack, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there were twenty more. Get an autopsy done on Dale. If the kidney tissue shows signs of acute tubular necrosis, then the man died of acute blood loss. Simple. And get someone else to do the autopsy, so there will be no accusations of incompetence—or pre-menstrual tension. Also, call up a few pathologists and ask them the best way to see if someone’s died of acute massive blood loss. They’ll tell you exactly what I’ve said.” Julia’s brow was furrowed and she was starting to look angry. “I mean, how many fucking people have to die before you police do your job?”

Vickers was surprised to hear Delaney curse. He had to stop himself from grinning. “Don’t blame me. I went to the deputy commissioner and put your facts forward. He turned me down. Hung up on me, just like you did. Just as rude, just as abrupt, just as unexpected.”

Vickers could see Julia soften a little bit. “I’m sorry. I’m truly and genuinely sorry, Frank. This isn’t like me at all, but there’s a maniac out there killing people, and you have to do something. Didn’t you swear some sort of an oath to protect and serve?”

“Yes I did—and I do. There are a lot of murderers serving life sentences in Berrimah Prison who will attest to the fact that I do my job very well.”

Again, Vickers could see Julia softening, coming around. He continued: “I’m going back to Darwin. I’ll have it out with Forster and I’ll get you that autopsy.” He offered a slight grin. “If you’re wrong, I’ll rub your face in it. If you’re right, I owe you dinner. In fact, why don’t we just have lunch now, get that part out of the way?” Vickers’ grin turned into a broad smile.

“Wouldn’t Mrs Vickers object to that?”

“Mrs Vickers objected to many things, but not to our divorce. Alas, Mrs Vickers is no more.” He got up in a swift and decisive movement that seemed to catch Julia by surprise. Taking out a card from his billfold, he handed it to her. “Give me a call on my private number when you’re ready to have that lunch.”

Then, after shaking her hand with a warm, firm grip, he started to leave the office before she could decline, with no more than a charming backward smile.

He was almost out the door when he heard, “Frank, actually, I’m a bit peckish now. Let’s have a bite.”

Dorset Creek did not boast many restaurants worthy of enthusiasm, although the place they chose also seemed to be having a bad day. The menu was simple, and it turned out most of the dishes were unavailable. The service hardly any better. They waited with growing awareness that the waitress was far more interested in conveying her dislike of her mother-in-law than attending to their meal. Fortunately, Superintendent Frank Vickers and Dr Julia Delaney were not too perturbed. They were relaxed and enjoying

each other's company—until the conversation turned once more to the murders.

"You know, Frank, had you got that autopsy done already, we'd be halfway there to getting this lunatic behind bars."

"Hang on a minute! You gave me some information. I took it to my boss. He pissed me off and told me not to do anything more about it. What else would you have me do? I'm not a one-man army."

Julia shut her eyes for a moment, then looked back up at him. "You're right. I have been a little pushy, and maybe I've been a bit unfair, but, for Christ's sake. Clearly, there's a madman out there. You've got to do something."

"I want to do something, but if I don't have facts that my bone-headed boss can't argue with, I'm powerless." Vickers paused. "If I didn't know better, I'd say he was deliberately throwing marbles under my feet."

Julia thought for a moment. "I convinced you with facts. Can we try to convince him, too?"

Vickers grinned. "That's a cracking idea. What can we present to Forster that even he can't argue with? He thinks I'm being obsessive... that's not like him. He's the most obsessive cop I know. Whenever he gets even the faintest scent of a crime, he never lets go—follows it through to the bitter end. He once saw a cigarette butt at a crime scene that had a strange, turned-up end. He'd seen something similar at another crime scene months before and decided it was the same person... Everyone else thought he was just being anal about it." Vickers shrugged. "Turned out he was right. He's the most observant detective you'll ever meet, yet here he is, presented with good solid facts, and says it's all bullshit. I just can't work it out." Vickers stopped, thinking. "Just a fucking minute! Holy fucking Christ!" Realising he'd just burst out with this in a restaurant, Vickers put his hand up to his mouth and blurted out, "Excuse me!"

“Don’t worry, Frank. I have three brothers, and most of my patients use the f-word every third word. Now. What did you just realise?”

“Bloody hell,” Vickers said, “Forster must be involved. Corrupt in some way.” Vickers started chuckling to himself, then glanced across at Julia, who wasn’t laughing. “Christ, Julia, you weren’t taking me seriously, were you?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time someone high up had been naughty.”

Vickers realised that maybe his joke hadn’t been so unrealistic after all. “I saw a *Columbo* episode where the forensic examiner at a crime scene seemed to deliberately ignore evidence. He was usually the best man they had—wouldn’t be swayed from even the most tenuous clue. Then, it turns out the forensic examiner was the murderer. When anyone does anything out of character, check it out, right? I’ve been blinded by the fact Forster is my chief. He’s up in Darwin. He’s either covering for someone or he’s got a motive for blocking this investigation.”

“Do you think he could be the murderer?”

“No, I’m sure he’s not. Maybe he suspects it’s a friend or relative. I can’t imagine he’s been bought off—couldn’t possibly be worth it to him. Maybe he has a shady past and has been compromised. Anyway, whatever it is, let’s just assume he has an ulterior motive. Even if I’m wrong, he’s no friend of this investigation—no way I can trust him any more. I think I’m going to go right to the top and have a chat with the commissioner.”

Julia frowned. “Frank, you’re not thinking this through. If he’s compromised, as you suspect, and he’s the deputy commissioner, what’s to say the commissioner isn’t involved? Maybe Forster is carrying out orders from above. Maybe Forster is on your side but has been warned off. For all you know, some VIP has gone mad and they’re trying to keep it under wraps.”

“I wish I had you as my assistant. You’re thinking like a detective. You’re a natural.”

"I've been a forensic pathologist for many years. I've dealt with the police and death and general physical mayhem all my professional life. Working with you on this, I'm impressed too."

"If you tasted my cooking, you'd be even more impressed with my new age skills. We can brainstorm this over a really decent meal. Who knows, maybe we'll solve the crime over lunch." Vickers gave Julia a wicked grin.

"Ahh. The male who lauds his own culinary skills. How often have I heard that? Not wishing to sound unpleasant, Frank but I'm sceptical of males who tell me how good a cook they are."

Julia flicked her pretty head to one side and Frank saw the light behind Julia caused a blonde glow around her shining hair. Was Julia being a little flirtatious? Not possible. She was many years younger than him but her body language and smile belied Vickers' doubts.

"Well Dr Julia, I'm getting hungry, so if you've got any food in at your place, why don't you let me demonstrate my gastronomic skills? Do you like soufflé?"

"Soufflé. Now I am impressed. Most people I know haven't even heard of a soufflé. Mine always sink on me."

Vickers got up and helped Julia out of her chair. "You're probably opening the oven door to peep. They don't like that. Allow me to demonstrate how to make a soufflé stand to attention."

Ten minutes later they were in Julia's neat no nonsense apartment, in her neat no nonsense kitchen sipping a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

"So where did you learn to cook?"

"Things weren't going well with my wife. We decided to live apart – at least for a while. I needed something therapeutic to do with my time off. I learnt to make bread – kneading it helped me relax. I got good at it and then enrolled in 'Le Cordon Bleu' course at night school. I've been doing that for five years. I just got my *Grand Diplome Classique*, two months ago – with distinction."

Julia was a little lost for words. Here was this tough cop, with a slight gut and heavy jaw. He'd seen the dregs of humanity on a regular

basis. Yet he had a diploma in the finest French cuisine. Most top chefs in Australia weren't even at that level. Could he be putting it on? Was Julia letting her guard down and allowing herself to be bull-shitted by another self-aggrandising male?

"So – what about this soufflé. What do you need?

"Well, we'll need parmesan cheese, butter, flour, mustard, garlic, milk, eggs, vintage cheddar and cream of tartar. A copper bowl and balloon whisk is best but I could use a simple egg beater, if that's all you have."

"I have everything. But supposing I'd wanted Coquilles Saint-Jacques. What would have been the ingredients for that?"

"You're testing me Julia. If I didn't know better, I'd say you doubted my skills – but since you ask, you'd need flour, salt, coriander, cayenne pepper, sea scallops, butter, mushrooms, onion, dry white wine, Cognac, and bread crumbs. I doubt if we'd have time to make that though."

Vickers looked a little smug and Julia was looking both amazed and a little embarrassed.

"Wow, Frank. Where were you 10 years ago, when the only thing that men seemed to be good at was removing girls' panties?"

"It doesn't do to stereotype people. One of my female sergeants has a 5th Dan in Karate. I wouldn't be game to take her on. There've been a few ex-tough guys who've tried – and picked themselves up from the floor, spitting teeth."

"You're right Frank. I'm a victim of the media. Come on, I'm starved. Truce!"

"Truce!"

Julia and Vickers were seated opposite each other in the sunlit lounge room, each nursing a glass of very expensive port. Vickers wouldn't normally drink port, but he thought Julia would appreciate

this choice after he deliberately shied away from the recommended, though predictable, Chablis.

Julia looked slightly uncomfortable and in a slightly strained way said, “Nice wine, Frank.” Vickers simply nodded, rather lost for words. He was trying not to stare at Julia’s breasts, so glimpsed down at her beautiful legs. Aware his glimpse had turned into a long look, he looked into Julia’s eyes. They were both inviting and soulful, as if she wanted to say something but didn’t quite have the courage.

With the unease of two teenagers who wanted to make an impression but were scared of messing up the moment, they both started talking at exactly the same moment. After a second or two, Julia started giggling, and it must have been infectious, because Vickers started laughing with her—just slightly at first, but then his chuckles became bellowing laughter. Vickers hadn’t laughed this hard in twenty years.

As Julia calmed herself down, she seemed to be staring at him with what looked like yearning. Tentatively, she nestled her head on his shoulder, and just as tentatively Vickers let his arm drape across her. Her perfume, flowing hair, and perfect skin were intoxicating to him. First, they embraced, then melted into the longest and most

passionate kiss he had ever experienced. It tasted sweet—sweeter than he had thought possible. He could feel Julia’s heart pounding. They kissed for what seemed like an eternity, and then he gently stroked her cheek with the back of his hand while gazing into her beautiful blue eyes that seemed to be a vault of mystery and desire.

“Frank, I—” Julia’s voice was trembling.



“Julia, you are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. You’re perfect, just absolutely perfect. What on earth could you like about a rough slob like me?”

She allowed a grin. “Maybe I have a soft spot for slobs.”

“And maybe I have something hard for your soft spot.” Vickers chuckled at his own puerile pun.

Julia grabbed his ears and gave them a hard tug. “Don’t do yourself down, Superintendent Vickers. I won’t have anyone calling you a rough slob.” Her brow was furrowed as she looked into his eyes. “You’re kind, you’re gentle, you’re intelligent, and you have a huge heart. So don’t do yourself down, Superintendent Vickers. You hear me? And if anyone else says anything bad about you, I’ll rip their lungs out!”

Vickers was genuinely impressed. He believed her.

With a husky voice, low and controlled, she looked up at him and said, “Frank, I don’t say this very often. But I could see you looking at me. I could feel your eyes undress me. I know you want me. I want you to make love to me.”

Vickers put his hand on her face. “I do want you, Julia. I want you more than anything else in the whole world. I want to make love to you all night, and then some... but...”

“But what?”

He bit his lip, trying to figure out how to best say this. “It’s just not right, Julia. We’d be doing it for the wrong reasons. We’ve both had setbacks. We both feel vulnerable. We both need our emotions bolstered. And I want it to be perfect. I want us to be relaxed. I couldn’t bear the thought I may be taking advantage of the situation.”

“But you wouldn’t be!”

“I think I would, and that’s not the way to start a relationship with the loveliest woman in the whole world. With you, it’s got to be perfect or not at all. You’re just too perfect.”

Vickers could see that Julia was stunned—she clearly didn’t get turned down too often. He got up slowly and, turning slightly, bent

to give her one final embrace. “Perfect or not at all, kid. You’re very, very special. Believe me, if and when it happens, it’ll be worth the wait. I’m going back to the hotel now. There’s no way on earth that I’ll sleep tonight, but I’ll still enjoy every single second thinking about you.”

Her eyes were moist as she pressed her head into his chest. “You do really mean those words, Frank, don’t you?”

“More than you will ever know.”

Vickers left the house quickly while he still had the resolve not to sink into her arms. He had never cried in front of a woman before and was damned if he’d let her see him doing it now. He strode out to his car, which was parked under a large tree.



He gripped the steering wheel with hands clenched, and his face contorted. Banging his head against the wheel, he swore out loud, his voice getting louder with every blow to the head. “Damn, damn, damn, damn!” There was a very good reason Frank didn’t want to have sex with Julia—and it wasn’t only because Julia was so perfect. How could he ever tell her?



CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

After Ray Dale's death, Vickers now had no lingering doubts that this was a serial killer at work. There was no way Forster could turn him down to elevate the investigation, unless, of course, Vickers' suspicions about Forster were right. Time to put it to the test.

He called Forster on his mobile. "Willem. We exchanged a few heated words before."

"Frank, Frank, don't sweat it, kiddo. You were just being enthusiastic. You're Frank Vickers, the best superintendent in the NT. Sorry I snapped at you. I just didn't want to see you throw your career down the toilet. What do you say we knock off a bottle of 18-year-old Macallan tomorrow? It's the best scotch you've ever tasted."

"I'd like that, Bill. The reason I called you, though, is that there's been a new development. A real big development. Bill, I've just been informed that a Ray Dale in Yarracoot died of a suspected heart attack yesterday. He was a haemophiliac. Bill, that's three haemophiliacs in three days. That isn't suspicious any more—that's a guaranteed serial killer. The chance of three haemophiliacs dying in three days, all in

suspicious circumstances, is astronomically small. Bill, we've got to elevate this to full-on public warnings. We'll get crucified if we try to keep a lid on this now."

There was a long silence, then a sound that sounded like hissing from Forster before he began his tirade. "So you're still peddling this shit. You've gone right against my orders. You know your problem, Frank? You've got too big an ego. You're always so fucking sure of yourself, aren't you? Well, I'm not covering for you anymore. We're done, you ungrateful prick. Let me put it clearly and plainly. I'm your superior officer and I am now giving you a direct order that if you don't cease and desist, I'll put you on suspension. If you breathe a word about this, or continue to investigate anything remotely connected with haemophiliacs, you're finished, washed up, dead in the water. Get yourself back to Darwin and be at my office by eight am. You're in for one serious bullocking."

"Sir. You've never been one to shy away from a murder, yet you're doing everything to turn two blind eyes away from these deaths. I don't even know you any more. You're acting like a stupid fucking idiot. Who's got to you? Why are you doing this? Boss or no boss, if you're involved in some dirty dealings, I'll serve your fucking head up on a silver platter, like John the fucking Baptist. Got it?" Vickers hung up and shouted at the phone, "Cunt!"



Seconds after Vickers had hung up the phone, Forster unlocked his top drawer, took out a mobile, and selected North Coast Insurance Brokers.

A female with an American accent answered.

“North Coast Insurance, how may I help you?”

“That gentleman I spoke to you about a day ago is still pursuing the insurance claim. I feel it’s time that you reassessed the risk.”

“Do you recommend the policy be cancelled?”

“No, definitely not. That might lead to further complications. Better if you find a way of... discrediting the policy. That way a full payout won’t be necessary.”

“I thought you rather liked the policy.”

“I became a lot less fond of it five seconds ago. I’d recommend urgent action, otherwise unnecessary claims are going to materialise.”

Forster hung up, let out a long sigh, and wondered whether he should have told “North Coast Insurance Brokers” to go fuck themselves when he was co-opted four weeks ago. Life had been much simpler up to that point, and their threats paled into insignificance next to this new looming shadow. He felt like the future was a beckoning whirlpool of raw sewage.



CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

With this setback and no actual plan as to how he'd get by his obviously corrupt or demented boss, Vickers was tempted to overcome his irritations in the usual way, and began to head for the nearest pub. But he also had another need, now—to check in with Julia. He thought she should know about Forster's continued standoff, wanted to ensure she was all right, and most of all, just wanted to hear her voice.

"No, sir. She's not here. Once she'd finished with her patients, she went out. I don't know where. Have you tried her mobile?" The receptionist's voice was casual. "I wouldn't be surprised if she hasn't just gone for a walk or a run. She's been working long hours of late."

But when he tried her mobile, all he got was an error message.

For the next hour, he tried every ten minutes. Then, feeling in need of sedation, he decided to go back to the pub and get dead drunk.

Vickers was beginning to feel like a local at the Coronation. Many of the faces, although a little blurred after a number of beers, were beginning to seem familiar. There was little doubt most of the clientele were long-distance truck drivers who drove the massive road trains that connected Darwin with the rest of the world. Ward was on his second vodka and orange, watching with alarm as his boss downed yet another beer.

"I cannot believe it, Ward. I just cannot fucking believe it! I thought that Bill Forster was a decent bloke."

"So you've been saying all night, sir," a disinterested Ward returned. "Don't you think we should be going back to our hotel now? It's been a long day, and..."

"Yeah, and tomorrow will be even longer. The more I think of it the more I reckon I'll go back to Forster. Squeeze his scrawny neck until he begs for mercy."

Knowing his boss, Ward was a little nervous that he might actually do this, especially in his present mood. "But you said Forster insists the deaths of the haemophiliacs were unconnected to the Rivers case. He's in charge. There's nothing you can do."

"All he had to do was sign that bloody application to the coroner, and I'd have given him his proof. Tell me, Ward—you believe there's a serial killer, don't you?"

"Truthfully, yes. No way on earth those deaths are a coincidence. But if the deputy commissioner isn't going to order the autopsies, we're done."

"That's the problem with you, Ward—you always have to play it by the book, don't you?"

"We're the police, sir. We have to play by the rules."

"Bullshit!" Vickers roared. "That's bullshit, Ward." His explosive comment was accompanied by a step backwards, which sent him crashing into a woman standing behind him. Beer glass in hand, he turned to her—a florid-faced blonde in the company of a man with

his back to the two of them. He was wearing jeans and huge Cuban heels...

"You! You fucking bastard. You're dead, mate!" snarled the truckie, who was sporting a large plaster on his nose and a huge bruise on his forehead. "I'm going to fuck you over so your own mother won't recognise you."

"Sorry, I don't understand a word you're saying. I reckon you should go for a good long lie down. You don't look well. By the way, how's the old nose feeling?"

The truckie clenched his fists. "Say that again, you ugly prick!"

Not having had half a dozen beers to cloud his judgement, Ward was able to assess what was going to happen in the next five or ten seconds. "Oh, no—for Christ's sake, not again. Sir, we really don't need this..." he cried, as he tried to restrain him. But his arm was shaken off with a determined shrug as Vickers faced the truckie, whose face was rapidly turning puce with rage.

"Don't tell me you're deaf as well as dumb?" Vickers goaded, before turning back to Ward with a wink. "The class of people you meet in some of these establishments leaves a lot to be desired, you know, Ward."

"Look out, sir," Ward cautioned as the truck driver made a grab for Vickers' shoulder.

Vickers wasn't just expecting the attack—more than that, he'd planned it. He spun around, bringing up his left arm and parrying the truckie's right fist before plunging his own right into the man's cheek.

The truck driver collapsed back against the bar, scattering drinkers. "Bastard!" he cursed. Grabbing a bottle of beer sitting on the bar, he



smashed it against the woodwork. In a shower of beer and glass he was left with the jagged bottleneck in his hand. "Come and get it, shitface!" he urged with a grin.

Vickers didn't flinch. Instead, he faked a left hook, faked a right hook, then kicked the truck driver in the balls, instantly releasing the day's demons.

The truckie's eyes bulged almost out of his head and he dropped to his knees.

Vickers grabbed the man's ears and crashed the truckie's head down onto his right knee once, then twice. The first time he broke the truck driver's nose; the second, he connected with his jaw and knocked him out cold.

Fights were obviously a familiar occurrence in the Coronation, and only a few people had taken notice. However, the bartender had obviously made a quick telephone call and a police car arrived on the scene within minutes. As two constables hurried up to him, Vickers flashed his badge. "Get this man to a doctor."

The truckie was bleeding profusely from nose and head, muttering incoherently. He was assisted somewhat roughly outside to a waiting car by two young policemen, but a third stood by respectfully. "Do you want to press charges against that guy, sir?"

Vickers shook his head. "No, he's got enough problems. Keep him in the watchhouse until he's sobered up, then kick him out."

"Had enough fun now, sir?" Ward asked, wearing a disapproving frown.

"Fun?" Vickers shook his head. "Only just beginning, Wardy." He emptied his glass.

"Back to the hotel now, sir?" said Ward hopefully.

"You go back to the hotel, Wardy. The night is young and I'm looking for an appointment to keep..."



CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Vickers was feeling pumped — and frustrated. The alcohol had started to wear off. He'd taken out his anger on the lout and it made him feel better, but still empty inside.

His appointment was hopefully with a young girl whom he had noticed in the corner of the bar. She had been watching the entire fray with a provocative smile.

She looked quite young, but somehow worldly and reminiscent of an American soap actress he couldn't quite place. She was wearing a pleated tartan short skirt and a blouse tied in a knot at the front. Huge sunglasses stood on top of her head, surrounded by gleaming brown hair that fell down towards her slender shoulders. Her shapely long legs tapered into black patent shoes with criss-cross bands that rose a few inches above her ankles.

"Mandy T, big man. I liked the way you handled yourself. That guy's a real shithead, always causing trouble. I don't think he'll be so brave in future."

Vickers instinctively sucked in his slight paunch. “Kind of you to say so, Mandy T. I was going to let it ride, but he did make the first move.”

“What brings you over here, Mr...?”

“Call me Frank. Superintendent Frank Vickers, NT Police.”

Vickers could see Mandy recoil at the word “police”. It took a moment to regain her composure. Vickers instinctively scanned her up and down when he saw the surprise in her eyes. He noted a couple of tell-tale marks on the inside crease of her elbows—she was an addict. No signs of long-term heroin abuse; this girl was a newcomer to the business and hadn’t yet developed the sunken eyes and yellowing skin that was a hallmark of the hardened user. Probably on the game to support her habit and a small-time thief for the same reason. And she only looked about eighteen.

“So, tell me, Mandy. I’m feeling a bit lonely tonight. Been a hard day. Do you know anywhere that someone like me could see some action? Don’t worry, I’m off duty and just another average Joe hungry for some fun...” Vickers gave her a broad, disarming smile.

“Well, Franky—can I call you Franky? I like a bit of action myself, but the cost is so high nowadays that I’d like you to make me an offer I can’t refuse.” Mandy was careful to avoid the word “money”, since her prospective client may still have been trying to set her up. Unlikely, though. An undercover policeman was hardly going to start a fight, then introduce himself as a cop.

“Mandy, you look like a girl who needs some company. Suppose I made a donation to your favourite charity of, hmmm, \$250, and I wanted a lot of flexibility and adventure, what would you say?”

“Well, Franky, if you wanted to be really adventurous and were the sort of bloke who didn’t see the need to wear a raincoat when it’s not raining, I would have thought \$350 would be closer to the mark—and that would be for an all-night adventure. I know you’d leave with a smile on your face.”

So, Mandy was prepared to do it without a condom. Risky, since Vickers was obviously not new to this, but what the heck. That Rivers girl had quite likely been the cautious type, and look at her now—in a chiller. *Carpe diem and all that crap...*

“Mandy. I’d love to be your companion for the rest of the evening. You definitely look like the kind of girl who could put a smile on my face. I’d be honoured.” He topped it off with a little bow. Mandy giggled.

Frank was no stranger to whores. Since the breakdown of his marriage, this was all his sex life consisted of. He had many choices, and they benefited from a superintendent who might owe them future favours.

“I think we’d better find a room, Mandy. Discretion and all that. After all, we have our reputations to maintain.”

She smiled wryly. The irony wasn’t lost on her.

Had “Franky” not been quite so inebriated and a little more vigilant, he’d have noticed an attractive, muscular, blonde woman watching his every move. She had carefully assessed the situation—Vickers soliciting a young prostitute. Opportunities like this were too good to miss.

The rooms at the back of the Coronation Hotel were actually small chalets. Travellers liked this—there was no noise from neighbours who had their televisions on too loud. They were fairly modern, although still had the look of yesteryear—dark and dingy with a slight musk of disinfectant. They were accessed through a front entrance that faced a small, dark street, and were mostly empty until Friday and Saturday nights. The rear entrance overlooked a bushy field, making the entire block secluded, peaceful, and isolated from the rest of the hotel.

Mandy didn’t have a real home, and this end chalet was the nearest she could call one. It was the room in which she usually entertained

her clients. The cleaner and Mandy had an arrangement—Mandy would slip the cleaner \$50 and the cleaner would turn a blind eye to what was going on, and then clean up after Mandy left.

The new and unlikely partnership settled in the room and, no small talk necessary, quickly got down to business.

“Business before pleaseure Franky.” Frank in his inebriated state fumbled for his wallet produsing seven crisp \$50 notes which Mandy quickly deposited into her handbag before turning her lustful eyes back to her eager companion.

Mandy was an adroit thief—a gifted pickpocket with natural ability for stealth. Had she not been drawn into the drug scene, she probably could have been a stage magician. Some people have innate sleight of hand, while others could never be good at the art, whatever their resolve. Her eyes were always darting around, searching for a client’s lapse of concentration. Then, with almost precognitive speed, her hands would be in a pocket, rapidly searching for something worth stealing and have it spirited it away, all in the blink of an eye.

Frank Vickers was no fool, and he’d seen a variety of thieves in his professional life. He was on his guard with everyone, and even more so when dealing with prostitutes.

Unfortunately for him, he’d met his match with Mandy. Moving across to Vickers, ostensibly to give him a passionate kiss, she lifted his gold fountain pen, shielding it from Vickers’ eyes and stowing it in her belt. She expertly walked away to prevent Vickers from seeing his property. Keeping the pen out of view, she lay down on the bed and secreted the pen under her pillow. That pen would buy one or two fixes—it was worth the risk.

“Let’s have a nice, hot, soothing shower, Mandy. Are you good at giving massages, by the way? I could really use one.”

“Mm, that’d be nice, Franky. I’ll soap you and me all over and we’ll get all squirmy and slippery. Would you like me to be all squirmy and slippery, Franky? But don’t worry, I’ve got a good, hard grip for those

parts of you that need that extra little bit of friction.” The shower lasted fifteen minutes.

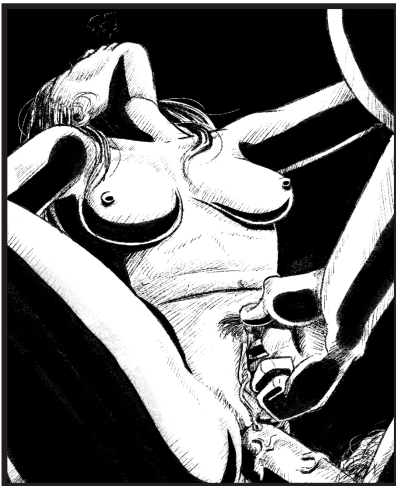
After they got out and fell on the bed, Vickers’ dick was not just hard, but painfully throbbing. Mandy was making all the right noises, and Frank had long forgotten about the transaction. Now all he wanted to do was bury himself into the firm young breasts that proudly pointed straight ahead. Vickers ejaculated almost immediately, while Mandy pummelled, prodded, caressed, licked, and scratched every part of his body. This girl was amazing.

Enthusiastic and obviously enjoying herself, her vaginal juices were dripping like a tap. Frank had already explored all the places one is supposed to explore, as well as the one place his wife would never have let him. Mandy moaned with just the right amount of excitement when Frank probed her with his tongue. He tasted the musty aromas that were driving him wild. He licked her from head to toe and kissed her feet. He ran his calloused hands over her curves, imagining she was Julia.

Across the top of Mandy’s natal cleft was a large tattoo of a butterfly, a broken, bleeding heart within. The blue letters under the butterfly simply said “Daddy” in copperplate script. Frank watched Mandy’s beautiful buttocks squirm around as he put his index finger

inside her vagina and his middle finger inside her anus. Mandy responded with deeper moaning. “Oh, I love that, Frank. I’m a dirty little whore, Frank. Make me dirtier. Deeper, deeper Frank, I’m a slut. Make me really dirty, baby.”

Frank nestled himself on top of the prone form of Mandy and snuggled his head next to her ear. “Shall we be very naughty, Mandy? Shall I make you really dirty? Want



me to really make you a bad, bad girl? You've been so naughty. It's time I did something to punish you." And before she could answer, Frank positioned himself carefully and slowly and gently eased his penis in between Mandy's buttocks as she cried out in both pain and pleasure.

"Fuck my arse, Daddy. Fuck it good, Daddy. Show me what a dirty whore I am, Daddy. Cum inside me, Daddy, I deserve it—oh yeeesss." Frank could feel his testicles pulling themselves inside his abdomen and the sensations built up into a furious crescendo. He had most of his hand inside Mandy's vagina and was pressing hard on her clitoris with his thumb. He was at the point of no return and the thrusting was short and fast. As he orgasmed, he murmured, "I love you, Julia, I want you..." And then, spent and exhausted, he collapsed to one side of Mandy, who was also lost in her own fantasies.



CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Far across the bushland, a blonde woman was working, and had been since Vickers and his consort arrived in the room. She put away the monitor and small collapsible tripod into the fitted case and checked with a compact flashlight she hadn't accidentally dropped anything out of the car, which was parked close to the chalets.

She picked up her mobile.

"It's me. I thought you'd be interested to know—our friend who's been sniffing around has a weakness for hookers. Just balled some young kid in Dorset Creek. He's there right now. Quite a little stallion, is our Frank."

"Don't use names on the phone. Idiot. Is he likely to be there for some time?"

"I think he'll be there for a while. Sounded like he was getting very well serviced."

"I'll come down right now. Put fresh batteries in the laser. Monitor every sound. As soon as he's gone, call me. I think I know how to stop our friend poking his nose into our business."

Kroeger hung the phone up. He'd had very little sleep but was used to this. Such an opportunity wasn't to be missed. It would be a long drive, but well worth it.

It was six am and still dark. Amanda was overdue for a hit and feeling like shit. Perspiration gathered on her brow. One hour after Vickers had left, through the mists of her withdrawals, Mandy T heard a gentle knocking at the back door. It took her a while to get out of bed and pull her thoughts together. She fumbled with the awkward catch on the sliding door. A man stood there with a large cap and sunglasses, dressed in grey from head to toe.

"Mandy?"

"Yes. Do I know you?"

"No, actually. But my good friend Frank Vickers gave me your details. I'm just in town for a short while and I thought you'd be interested in having some fun."

"Frank works fast. Look, I'm not feeling that well, friend. Sorry, but I'll have to take a raincheck."

"That's a shame, Mandy. I was hoping you could help me. I have a spare \$1,000 and was hoping to get to know you better."

Mandy couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "A thousand dollars? Why didn't you say? Any friend of Franky's is a friend of mine. Come on in. I'll just freshen up a little. Have a seat. What should I call you?"

"Wolf."

"Okay, Wolfy, pour yourself a drink, if you like. I won't be long."

Mandy hopped into the shower and quickly made herself as presentable as she could.

"So Wolfy, shall we get the business side out of the way? Then we can concentrate on making you happy and relaxed."

Kroeger handed her ten \$100 notes. He didn't bother about fingerprints—Mandy T wasn't going to end up with the money, anyway.

"Up here on business, Wolfy?"

"That's right."

"That's an interesting accent. Kiwi?"

"South African."

"All righty, what's your fancy, Wolfy?"

"You can start by stripping," he said.

"Do you want to talk for a while? A lot of my clients like a chat. They say I'm a good listener."

Someone started bellowing and cursing in the car park. "Hey you! Armani suit. I know you're in there, you fucking bastard. Come on out. I'll fuckin' kill you."

The truckie had sobered up and was now angling for a third battle with Vickers. Armed with the information that Mandy T and Vickers had been seen together, the truckie had decided he would redeem his ebbing alpha status.

Kroeger looked through the window, analysing the situation. He knew of the truckie's previous altercations with Vickers, thanks to Gazal's surveillance. If the buffoon found out which room Mandy was in, he'd try to break the door down. Kroeger would have to silence him—and that would ruin the plan. For the few moments his attention was diverted, Mandy had slipped her hand into Kroeger's bag, quickly rummaged around, and selected what felt to be the most valuable object. In this case, it was the \$50,000 laser listening device. In the blink of an eye, she'd pulled out the instrument and put it under one of the pillows. Kroeger, good as he was at maintaining concentration, couldn't look in two places at the same time. Those three or four seconds were all Mandy needed.

When he turned back to Mandy, she looked a little tense—she never knew whether clients had seen her stealing out of the corner of their eyes.

Kroeger decided to just let the drunk rant and rave. If the truckie did find the right room, he'd sort him out, like he sorted everything else out.

"I'm not the talkative type," he responded. "Strip for me. Okay?"

"Whatever turns you on, Wolfy."

His cold eyes took in every movement. Now, sitting on the bed, she pulled her skin-tight top over her head. Her soft, smooth skin was milky white. He waved a finger for her to continue.

Now she stood in just her black lacy panties. "Like my legs? I'm really a dancer. A good one, too." She flexed her legs, then did several high kicks, with first her right leg and then her left shooting up almost to the vertical. She grinned at him. "See? Real supple."

The client was unimpressed. "Don't stop there," he said.



"Okay." She dragged her black panties down, revealing a small patch of dark pubic hair, then kicked them off. Naked, she stood before him, perspiration glistening on her pale skin. She smiled enticingly. "You like, Wolfy?"

"Lie on the bed," he commanded.

"Aren't you going to get your gear off, too?"

"Later. Lie on the bed for me, okay?" He sounded friendlier now.

The sound of a car tyres screeching to a halt distracted Kroeger. He went back to the window. A police car had turned up. Kroeger's heart rate went up slightly, but the police had simply been cruising by and heard the truckie. He was unceremoniously bundled back into

the police car. Kroeger's face twisted into disgust. How could society put up with such human garbage?

Mandy didn't even seem to take in the disturbance. She'd heard and seen so many fights that she was completely inured to such behaviour.

She as doing as instructed, pulling back the covers and stretching out on her back across the bed.

"What can I do for you now, Wolfy?"

On hearing the police car drive off, Kroeger relaxed and got straight back to business.

"It's more what I can do for you." He came closer and stood looking down at her.

"Oh, yeah? How?" She smiled uncertainly up at him. He didn't look like the normal conceited stud who thought he was going to show her what a sexual powerhouse he was.

"You're a user," he said, more as a statement than a question.

She squirmed inwardly. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Look at your arms."

With sudden embarrassment, she folded her arms to conceal the small vertical scars along the veins near the bend in her arms, scars a layman would think nothing of.

"So?" she responded defensively.

"I might be able to do you a favour."

"Like what?" she asked, suspicious.

He reached into a pocket, took out a small aluminium foil pack, and held it in front of her. "It's yours."

Her eyes widened. She didn't have to be told that the little pack contained heroin. "What makes you think I would be interested in that?" she said, unable to take her eyes off the gleaming foil.

"You would like it, wouldn't you?"

"You're not a cop?"

He scowled down at her. "What do you think? Cops don't hand out \$1,000."

Amanda looked him in the eye. She prided herself on being able to read people by what she saw in their eyes. But she could read nothing in these eyes—they were a cold, desolate, foreign land to her. “Why are you offering it to me?”

“Frank said you were into hammer. He thought you’d need a taste. Anyway, I like my girls relaxed.”

She looked at him uncertainly.

“You don’t want it? Okay, that’s fine by me.” He started putting the foil pack away.

She reached up and grabbed his wrist. “You want me to shoot up now?” she asked.

“If you like.” He knew she would like.

She slowly nodded, looking from the little pack to the client and back again. So, he was just another user who wanted to get her turned on. But, what the hell, a free sample was a free sample. Amanda sat up and took the pack from him.

He watched her as she ripped it open then licked the end of her right index finger and dipped it into the pack. She tasted the white powder—ninety per cent pure or better, at a guess. As good as it gets. She nodded. “You got the gear?”

“Of course.” He crossed the room for his bag, then returned and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her. He took out a tourniquet, a new syringe, a vial of water, a teaspoon, and a disposable gas lighter. “Be my guest.”

No more encouragement needed, she poured a little of the white powder into the spoon then added the water and mixed the two together with her finger. Flicking on the gas lighter, she let the flame play on the underside of the spoon. The liquid bubbled and spat and the powder dissolved, leaving a clear hot fluid. She rolled up a little cotton wool and placed it into the liquid, then put the tip of the hypodermic needle into the centre of the cotton wool and drew the fluid up into the syringe. Then, while it was cooling, she laid it aside and applied the tourniquet to her right arm. She did all



this knowing he was watching, but didn't care. Her heart racing with expectation, she slapped the veins of her arm several times to make them dilate and pout.

The man in grey stood up and gave her room as she swung her legs over the side of the bed, then rested her right elbow on the bedside table and gently inserted the tip of the needle into her skin. She felt the muffled *pop* as the needle perforated the wall

of the vein. As she withdrew the plunger, a small quantity of blood swirled back into the syringe and mingled with the transparent heroin solution. Leaving the syringe in her arm, she let the tension out of the tourniquet and depressed the syringe's plunger slowly and carefully.

The drug flowed into her bloodstream; she could feel a familiar tingling sensation at the back of her head. Then a warm, dreamy, relaxed feeling washed across her entire body. She always thought this would be what it would feel like to be back in the womb. Cautiously, she injected the rest of the liquid, a little at a time. When the syringe was empty, she removed it and then unfastened the tourniquet. The client took both from her. With an effort, she swung her legs back onto the bed and then laid full length once more. "That's good," she sighed, staring at the ceiling. Her first trips had been orgasmic, mind-blowing stuff. These days, now that her system was used to it, heroin merely eased the craving and sent her floating to a planet called Peace.

"Okay?" asked the man in grey, sitting on the bed beside her again and looking down into her dazzled eyes.

Amanda nodded slowly. "Mmmm." All worry and pain had melted away. She was on the way to her own private place.

"You just relax," he said, stroking her hair, "and I'll tell you a story." He checked the time on his digital watch. Then, he began a monologue. "I was born in South Africa." His tone was soft and conversational. "Bloemfontein. It means 'fountain of flowers'." As he spoke, he poured the remaining contents of the aluminium foil packet into the spoon, then added water. "It's a pretty little city. A lot of hills and *kopjes*."

His voice was soothing as he applied the flame of the gas lighter to the spoon and watched the heroin dissolve.

Amanda's eyes had closed. There was a smile on her lips. A bead of perspiration trickled from her neck and down through the valley between her breasts. "Sounds a nice place," she said.



"My mother died when I was a teenager. There was a burglary at our house. My father was out. I was upstairs. I saw what was happening and tried to reason with the burglars, but my mother was shot dead. I could have used my father's pistol—he kept it in his bedside table. All I had to do was take the gun, creep down the stairs, and shoot the black bastards in the back and my mother would have lived. I

chose to go downstairs and appeal to them. My delay, my weakness, my compassion cost my mother's life." He paused, collecting himself. "I was lucky to escape myself. My father and two of his friends turned up at our house in the nick of time. The blacks ran off. We never found them. Well, you can understand, can't you? One *kaffir* looks like another. They'll have just gone back to their shit-hole village, with the hundred rand they stole. So, you see, those blacks valued my mother's life at one hundred rand. Not much, is it?"

He kept up his comforting bedside manner, watching the girl. “There are a lot of modern buildings in Bloemfontein, but a number of quite historic ones, too. Like the Moeder Kirk, the oldest NGK church in the Orange Free State. My father was pastor at the Moeder Kirk, you know. We were a devout NGK family. NGK—that’s the Dutch Reformed Church. I wanted to go to Bloemfontein University, but my father made me join the army. He said it would build my character, you see. My father thought I was a bit of a wimp.” He picked up the syringe and drew up the contents of the spoon. “So, I joined the South African Army. I thought I would hate it—I had no interest in sports or physical activities at school. But, do you know, I took to the army like a duck to water.” He managed a faint smile. “I loved the army. My father was right—it did build my character. I went in as a raw recruit... and I came out as a captain in the Parabats—the parachute corps.” He put the tourniquet on Amanda’s arm.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, her eyes foggy. “What are you doing?” she asked. Her words came out slowly; she didn’t slur, she simply spoke at a leisurely pace.

“I’m giving you another little taste,” he said with a soothing smile, “because you’ve been a good girl.”

She smiled back at him, a vague look on her face. “Not too much, though, it’s strong stuff.”

He tightened the tourniquet, then lifted Amanda’s limp right arm and tapped the veins. Then, he chose one, slipped the needle into it, and slowly injected a little of the clear fluid.

“I did a lot of work for the CCB, too. That’s the Citizen’s Cooperative Bureau. Banned now, of course. We removed ANC sympathisers from the equation—whites as well as *kaffirs*. It was good for the soul. My father would have approved, had he known. My father hated *kaffirs*. You would never have known it from what he said up there in the pulpit, but he knew they were only animals.

“I saw real human carnage. Dismembered and blown-up human bodies. My father told me that a good soldier must often do things he

finds unpleasant, for the good of society. He made me repeat it again and again. That's why he called me 'Wolf'—resourceful and lone. A soldier must do what he has to – not what he wants to.



"The whole world turned on South Africa, made us hand our country over to those savages. After the *kaffirs* gained power, I left the army and worked as an operative for Tactical Solutions Worldwide. They're a mercenary company in France. I'm the best they've got." Kroeger smiled to himself. "I won't kill anyone without a good reason, so don't think this is anything personal. You've got an important role to play. It's necessary. I hope you

understand. I know quite a lot about my employers, the victims, and the reasons for the contract. It's for a good cause—I hope you understand why you have to die."

Dreams had claimed Amanda now. She heard the man's voice, but couldn't make sense of what he was saying. It sounded silly. She giggled.

Gradually, he injected all the heroin into her. "My father was very strict, you know. Beat the hell out of me. Used his belt. I still have the scars on my back to prove it." His eyes glazed over and his voice became tense. "My mother would lock herself in her bedroom when he was belting me within an inch of my life. To drown out my screams, he would put an LP on our record player and turn it up loud. Very loud. His favourite for these occasions was Albinoni." He looked down at her. "Do you know Albinoni? Hey!" He shook her by the shoulder.

Her eyes remained closed.

“Of course you don’t,” he went on. His voice was suddenly cold and terse as he broke into Afrikaans.

“Wat sou ‘n vuil slet soos jy weet oor klassieke musiek? Jy is net besteebare asblik. Die wêreld is baie beter afsonder jou.” [What would a slut like you know about classical music? You’re just expendable trash. The world is far better off without you.]

All pretence had vanished. Amanda was beyond care, beyond protestation.

“Ek moet vandag speel Albinoni aan jou. Jy sal dit geniet. Baie geestelike.” [I should be playing Albinoni to you today. You would enjoy it. Very spiritual].

The needle came out, and his soothing voice returned.

“Alle gedoen het, sal jy nie ‘n ding nou voel. All done.” [You won’t feel a thing now].

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, smiling. Expressionless, he stared back down at her.

Her mouth open, she gulped hard. And then her breathing stopped. Her eyes closed, and she slipped into oblivion. The drug had done its job. As Amanda lapsed into unconsciousness, her brain activity slowed. Her pulse raced. Within two to three minutes, her heart would cease to beat. She lay there, naked, unmoving, and mouth gaping open. Eyes closed and face calm, looking as if she was merely asleep, the life silently slipped from her unprotesting body.



He left her there on the bed, with the tourniquet still on her arm. Already her skin was beginning to turn blue. He pulled on a pair of

black gloves, then, using a paper tissue, wiped the syringe, spoon, lighter, foil packet, and water vial clean of any fingerprints.

Now he dabbed his forefinger into the pool of perspiration in the girl's navel and smeared the moisture onto the fingertips of her left hand. Amanda was left-handed—he had noted that earlier. He retrieved the empty foil packet.

In death, human fingers naturally rest in a neutral position with a gap between thumb and index finger. The man in grey placed the foil pack between Amanda's thumb and fingers, then pressed. They came together and made a neat impression of her finger and thumbprints on the foil. It was as simple as using a stapler—press, impress, release. He repeated the act with the water vial, spoon, and lighter, blurring some prints a little to make them look natural.

He then retrieved his \$1,000 and what he assumed was other clients' money leaving only the seven \$50 bills with sequential numbers that almost certainly had to be Vickers' payment—they would bear Vickers' fingerprints. He took up his bag then stood and surveyed the scene to ensure there was nothing to link him with Amanda Tate's demise.

Crossing to the door, he paused to look back at the naked corpse. He would have preferred Julia Delaney to be lying there. If it weren't for his orders not to touch her, he would have eliminated the troublesome doctor before now. But Amanda Tate was a different kettle of fish. No one would miss her, but in death she would perform a very valuable service to Kroeger. It was 6:20 am. Dawn was breaking. Kroeger slid open the door and silently made his way back to his vehicle, three streets away.



CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Mandy T had been using the Coronation Motel for most of her professional life. Being young and fresh meant she was popular, which provided an income that, although not always constant, was enough for her needs, and a growing stash that would go towards her father's legal defence and hopefully release from his jail sentence.

Whatever money she earned was constantly squirrelled away in a special place only she and the cleaner knew. And the only reason it stayed there was the \$50 that exchanged hands regularly.

The young girl was generally an early riser, and would leave the room by eight am for her morning run, and was usually back by nine. So, hearing no answer after the few knocks at eight o'clock, the cleaner used her passkey.

It took only a moment's glance at the bed to see the ashen corpse lying in the bed, with the needle close by as evidence of death. She let out an involuntary scream, dropped her tray of cleaning materials, and almost fainted, though a second or so later she regained her composure enough to feel some sympathy for the young girl.

Poor, poor Amanda. Time and again, she'd warned her about using drugs. But the silly girl had taken little heed, even when the cleaner told her the story about her cousin who had died a horrible death as a result of an overdose.

Using a pillowcase to avoid leaving fingerprints, the cleaner opened up Mandy's bag. There was a lot of cash there. She was tempted to take it, but then realised the police would be investigating. What if they traced the last client? He might mention how much he'd paid. If that amount wasn't there, suspicion would fall on the cleaner immediately. She had a quick look round the room—nothing obviously of value, and Mandy didn't have any jewellery worth taking. The cleaner quickly felt under the sheets, then the pillows—and felt the cold metal of the listening device and Vickers' fountain pen. The binoculars were strange-looking, but looked expensive. She took a chance they were Mandy's, covered them with a plastic bag, and slipped them into her cleaning trolley, along with the pen.

With a quick look outside to ensure she was not being watched, the cleaner made her way to the bathroom and felt for the cache of money she knew was there. That brought a grim smile to her face. The little whore had been busy.

Going to the mirror, she stood for a moment, composing a face full of grief and horror, then dialled zero on the phone to put her in touch with the receptionist, so she could report the death to the manager.

Within minutes he had joined her in the room, providing a fatherly shoulder to cry on before agreeing she should go home. He would inform the police of her whereabouts if they had needed to talk to her.

An hour or so later, the binoculars and pen had been sold to a secondhand store in Dorset Creek, and the cleaner was able to go home and grieve for the poor young prostitute who had lost her life so prematurely and carelessly.



Kroeger was furious with himself. He hadn't checked the bag until about eleven the morning of his latest murder.

He had not had the opportunity to plan with his usual meticulous eye for detail and, therefore, had been rushed. The thought of retrieving the laser device occurred to him, but he knew it would be too risky.

Kroeger was as hard on himself as he would have been on anyone else. He should have checked everything carefully before he left Tate's room—that was what he normally did. Maybe he was getting sloppy.

He'd need another unit. There was no problem with that—his masters had virtually unlimited funds, and \$50,000 was neither here nor there, but he'd have to lie about how he'd lost the unit. Kroeger hated that prospect. Killing people was one thing, but lying to your superiors was *verboden*. He contacted Gazal.

"It's me. We'll need a new laser device. You'll have to get me another one quickly."

"What happened to the old one?"

"Never fucking mind what happened to the old one. Just get me a replacement unit quickly, all right?"

Gazal listened in disbelief. Kroeger was always so controlled—creepily so. It was completely out of character for him to snap. Maybe he was human, after all...

Kroeger was calming down—he was now in damage control. The police might not have even found the device. It was possible the Tate girl had hidden it—then again, she hadn't really had any time to do so. It would have had to be placed either under the bed or pillow. The cleaner may well have found it before anyone else. Maybe she would steal it—that would be the best outcome. Even if the police found it, they probably wouldn't know exactly what it was, and besides, they would assume it was Tate's own property—something she used to listen in on potential clients, maybe. Yes, that was the most likely scenario. There was no way they would tie the device to Tate's death.



CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Frank Vickers was also furious with himself. First thing in the morning, Vickers realised that his gold fountain pen was missing. Most people who lose an item assume they've put it down somewhere. Not Vickers. He knew he'd had it stolen, and he knew exactly who had done the stealing. What he didn't know was that the thief was now in a chiller at the morgue.

As any experienced policeman knows, petty thieves usually get rid of items quickly. The more cunning ones sell the item way out of town, but that was surprisingly rare. Most thieves go to the closest pawn shop. This stupidity always mystified Vickers—how could people not work things out a little better?

The cleaner had been fractionally smarter than many. She, at least, had tried secondhand shops as far away from the motel as possible, but even that was only two miles. Two shops had been suspicious and declined to buy the items, but one dealer offered \$50 for the pen and \$120 for the binoculars. He couldn't get the binoculars to work, but they looked expensive, and he was well pleased with the deal.

Vickers happened on this secondhand dealer only two hours after the cleaner had been there.

"I'm looking for a gift for my daughter," he said casually.

"Sure, mate. We've got lots of stuff. How old is she?"

"Twenty-one. Just graduated from university. Sociology."

The dealer offered a variety of suggestions—watches, bracelets, necklaces. Vickers countered all the suggestions as being things his daughter already had. Deliberately not mentioning the word "pen", Vickers asked, "What about a typewriter? I'm told they're coming back in fashion. She's always writing letters to the newspapers."

"Haven't seen one in years. Don't think I'd buy one—nobody would repair them. They're ancient history, mate. Writes letters, eh? What about a nice pen? I've got loads here."

"You mean a ball point pen?" asked Vickers.

"Nah, one of those filling pens. You know—you fill 'em with ink. All the executives are using them now."

"Hm. I didn't think they were around. Do you think she'd like one?"

"Mate, she'd be over the moon. I've just got in this nice gold pen. Bit pricey—\$250—but it's for your daughter, right?"

Vickers recognised his pen immediately. A solid-gold Parker 51 bearing the initials JV on the clip. The pen had been given to Vickers by his father just before he'd died.

Vickers smiled at the dealer and gently took hold of his jacket lapels. He pulled upwards, raising the hapless man onto his toes. The dealer seemed to take a few seconds to realise what was happening.

"Shit for brains. You've got three seconds to tell me where you got this pen before I rip your balls off. Nod your head if you are going to be helpful."

The dealer, eyes widening and jaw dropping, nodded his head violently. Vickers grinned—the dealer looked like he was going to wet himself.

Within seconds, the dealer had opened up about who'd sold him the items. Vickers pocketed the pen and told the dealer to take the binoculars to the police station—or else. The dealer didn't need to be told twice.

“Got a dead junkie in the Coronation Hotel, Sarge. The cleaner just found her. Name's Amanda Tate. On the game for a short while. Eighteen years old. No suspicious circumstances. Looks like an OD. Only one small thing—the back door was unlocked.”

The duty sergeant of the Dorset Creek Police Station looked unimpressed. “So?” He didn't have a lot of time for prostitutes or junkies. As far as he was concerned, the only good junkie was a dead one. Time spent investigating their deaths was time wasted.

“Well, Sarge, supposing someone was in there with her, that'd make them an accessory.” The duty constable knew how to push his superior's buttons. The death of a junkie would never have galvanised the sergeant into action, but the prospect of nailing an accomplice would definitely interest him.

“Good point, Steve. We'll make a policeman of you yet. Get the forensics boys over there and check to see who her recent clients were. Tell them to dust the money for prints, too. Maybe her last customer has a record.”

Two hours later, the police had a description of a pumped-up, hefty-looking bloke, about 5'11”, with thick, unruly hair... and, an hour later, they had his identity.

Willem Forster was reading a letter he had just finished typing up on his laptop. He kept staring at the phone—surely he would have

received a call by now. When the phone did start ringing, he almost jumped. “Deputy Commissioner Forster speaking.”

“Sir, er, this is Sergeant Bell from Dorset Creek. I thought you should know, sir. We have a very delicate situation here.”

“Yes, Sergeant, go on.”

“Well, sir, to put it bluntly, we’ve got a dead prostitute—obvious drug overdose—the thing is, her last customer was Superintendent Vickers from the crime squad. I’m sure he’s not involved in her death but, er, we would appreciate some guidance. I mean, he’s a superintendent, and—”

Forster cut in, adopting a fatherly tone. “Sergeant Bell, did you say? It sounds as if you are a dedicated officer. You’re probably well overdue for promotion.” He paused, letting that sink in. “I’m sure we all understand the Northern Territory police can’t show any favours to high-ranking officers. If you’d bring any ordinary member of the public in for questioning, then you’ll have to bring Superintendent Vickers in. Naturally, I want you to show him all due respect, befitting his rank, but you must, above all else, do the right thing. The public expects no less. You have my full backing.”

One hour after that, Vickers was being interviewed by Bell.

“So, sir, you don’t deny being a, er, client of the deceased?”

“No, Tom, I don’t; besides, you know it was me. Look, I got a bit drunk. I had a hard day. I’m divorced. I needed some company. How the hell was I to know the poor kid was going to OD? She didn’t seem depressed or anything. And, another thing—I don’t have to tell you that prostitution isn’t illegal in the NT.”

“Still, it doesn’t look good for a police superintendent to be screwing a prostitute who dies a few hours later. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but Deputy Police Commissioner Forster asked me to hand you this.”

Vickers took the fax, noting the Northern Territory crest at the top.

Attn: Superintendent F Vickers, Crime Squad

Dear Superintendent Vickers,

Due to recent event, relating to the death of TATE, Amanda, and your presumed relationship with the deceased, I have made the regrettable decision to place you on paid suspension, pending a full investigation. You are required to leave your firearm and warrant card with the duty sergeant. A receipt will be issued for these items. I do hope we can sort this matter out, but the public have to be absolutely assured of the highest moral and professional standards of the Northern Territory Police Force, and especially for serving commissioned officers.

Yours faithfully,

W Forster, Deputy Commissioner

“Bullshit, absolute total bullshit!” Vickers scrunched up the fax and threw it against the door. “That fucking bastard. He’s been waiting for something like this. Didn’t even give me a chance to explain my side. Bit convenient, that Tate girl’s death, don’t you think?”

The duty sergeant was looking slightly embarrassed.

“Well, Frank, what else could he do? If the media get hold of this, they’ll be clamouring for some action. He was just thinking of the force’s reputation.”

“Oh, don’t worry, the media will find out. Something tells me this story will get leaked—sooner, rather than later—and when it does, the source will be headquarters.”

“Frank, surely you’re not suggesting the deputy commissioner has something personal against you. I mean, how could he have any involvement with your... recreational pursuits?”

“Yes, how indeed. How could he have known? Unless I was being watched.”

“Don’t you think you’re possibly being a little paranoid?”

“You have no idea what’s been going on, Tom. Yes, sleeping with a hooker was ill-advised, but there have been some fucking weird things happening since the Rivers murder.”

Tom stared at him. “I have to do what Forster says. Let’s sort out the paperwork, and then I won’t hold you any longer. If it’s any consolation, I am sorry this has happened. You’re a bit of a legend around these parts. If I could have helped, I would have. Hope you know that.”

“Okay. Let’s get things sorted out. There are a couple of things you could do for me that wouldn’t entail running foul of Forster.”

“Name it.”

“Firstly, the gun is my personal property. I have a club licence as well as a police carry licence. I’ll make sure it’s secured as soon as I get home. Also, I’d really appreciate it if you could give me details of anything you find with the Tate investigation—anything at all. I’m getting the feeling that her death might not have been an accident.”

Tom frowned. “Well, the back door was unlocked. Someone could have been with her and slipped out the rear door. There was no sign of a struggle, though. No evidence at the scene that could be described as unusual.”

“Was all my money in her bag?”

“Yes, Frank. \$350 in \$50 notes. Every one had your prints on them.”

“What about the other money?”

“Other money? There was no other money.”

“Yes, there was. When I gave her the \$350, she already had some \$100 and some \$20 notes.”

“They weren’t there when we got to her.”

“Well, there you are, then. Someone else was with her after I left. Check her mobile phone, check with the reception staff. Someone else was there and gave her a hot dose. She’s a murder victim, Tom.”

“The thing is that Forster was anxious to see the case wrapped up straight away. He said it was clear to him it was an accidental death and he said this should be reflected in my report. Said he didn’t want to waste time and resources on a clear-cut case.”

Vickers had to stop himself from screaming out loud. “Yes, but things are different now, aren’t they? Someone took her other money, leaving just the money with my prints. Come on, for Christ’s sake! Don’t you think it’s strange that a prostitute doesn’t have any other money on her? When was the last time you came across that?”

“Well, now you mention it, never—but Forster was very insistent.”

“Are you going to be a high-class sergeant or pander to Forster’s whims?”

The sergeant straightened up and took a deep breath.

“Frank, I’ve always done the right thing. If your instinct is that Tate’s death was suspicious, then that’s good enough for me.”

The police in Dorset Creek respected Vickers immensely. He was leader of the common man, yet could walk with kings. Even though all the officers knew Vickers had been stood down, they still regarded him as a role model, someone any police officer could rely on. They still called him “sir” and pretended they didn’t know that he was officially suspended.

“Tom, do you have any security videos of the Coronation Pub?”

“We don’t, but I’ll put a call through to the manager and tell him to help you. I can’t get the tapes myself, but I promise the manager will play ball. He doesn’t want to get on the wrong side of us—his liquor and gaming licence is coming up for renewal soon. I’ll make him aware of that. Expect him to be very cooperative.”

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

“We’re all hoping things get sorted out for you. If there’s anything you need—and I do mean anything at all—just call.”

“Thanks again, Tom. We make a good team.”

Vickers, as expected, found the Coronation Pub’s manager extremely helpful. “I’ve got all the security videos ready for you, Superintendent. You can use that room there—there’s a computer and spare disks, if you need to make a copy. Just let me know if you need any help with the equipment.”

Vickers started to watch the interior videos. He smiled to himself when he saw the rerun of the fight with the truckie. Then the meeting with Amanda. She was so attractive, poor kid. He felt sad to think he might have dragged the girl into this murderous cesspool. He called in the manager and asked if most of the people in the video were known to him.

“Yes, most are regulars, especially that truckie you sorted out. What a prick. You really handled yourself well. He’s always causing trouble.”

“Anyone here you don’t recognise?”

“Well, there are a few I haven’t seen before, but they all look pretty standard. Apart from that blonde chick.”

Although her face was a little fuzzy, Vickers could make out the proud bearing, the muscular yet feminine frame—and more to the point, the fact she was constantly looking in the direction of Vickers.

He watched as his earlier self and Mandy Tate left the pub and the blonde immediately followed. The outside security videos were not as clear, but still pretty good. He saw the blonde get into a large 4WD and watch the motel cottages with binoculars. They were strange binoculars, one lens at the back and two lenses at the front. Even though the curtains were drawn, the blonde kept looking through the instrument. That made no sense—she couldn’t possibly see anything. Then it dawned on Vickers that he’d seen those binoculars before at

the secondhand dealer where he'd managed to retrieve his fountain pen.

He made copies of all the videos and returned to the police station.

"Tom, did that shyster of a secondhand dealer bring in the binoculars he bought from the cleaner?"

"He sure did. He almost ran in with them. Hardly could get a word out, he was so scared. What on earth did you do to him?"

"We can talk about that later, Tom. Can I see them?"

"Sure you can. Hang on a minute, I'll get them. Are they important?"

"I hope so."

The binoculars were obviously precision-made, very heavy, and bore the letters STG. In smaller writing were the words "Laser Surveillance Technologies Corporation, San Francisco" and "Model 38B".

Vickers looked through the single lens at the rear, but he couldn't see anything. On pressing the power button, the device emitted a sound like a flashgun charging up, and a green-tinged image gradually appeared in the single lens.

Vickers searched around for some headphones. After plugging them in, he started pointing the device in various directions. The display had information readouts right, left, top, and rear. As he moved the unit around, the readouts changed—they showed distance, temperature, decibels, and signal-to-noise ratio. Even the dark corners of the police station stood out as if they were illuminated by a searchlight. There was no sound, only a *gloop, gloop* noise as the unit swept from side to side. Vickers was about to abandon the device, assuming it was just a set of image intensifier binoculars.

Then a thought came to him. Why would the unit have two lenses at the front and just one at the back? It made no sense. The whole idea of binoculars is to form a stereoscopic image for the user. One lens at the rear ensured that wouldn't be possible.

The blonde in the security video had been pointing the unit at the motel chalet, even though the curtains had been drawn. Vickers went to an open window and pointed the unit at some buildings across the street. Immediately the display showed the distance, and as soon as the central red dot in the display was overlaying one of the windows, a crackly sound started to come through. The display changed again and a blue light started flashing. After a couple of seconds, the flashing blue became constant, and the sound became perfectly clear. He could hear a conversation between a man and a woman.

“Here, Tom, check this out. You won’t believe it.” The other officer put the instrument up to his eye and after a few seconds, turned to Frank with a dumbfounded expression.

“I thought this kind of stuff only existed in James Bond movies.”

“Tom, can you contact Darwin and see what exactly this equipment is? It doesn’t look like anything that can be bought. Has to be something specifically for the military. Must have cost a fortune.”

Vickers showed the sergeant the security video. “That blonde was listening to everything I did in that motel room. I reckon she’s involved in Amanda Tate’s death somehow. Who the hell are we dealing with here, and why would they be interested in me screwing a whore in a motel room? Unless...”

“Unless what, Frank?”

“Unless we’re not dealing with security forces, but someone who has to discredit me at all costs.”

“Superintendent? I’ve got the information on the laser device. According to the company that makes it, these things don’t exist. When I told them that I was holding one in my hands, they said I must be mistaken. They suggested someone had obviously put one of their labels on some cheap pair of binoculars. Then I told them

about the readouts and the fact I could hear conversations from half a mile away. They put me onto someone. He asked a load of questions and then asked for my discretion. Said the unit was something experimental and that I should return it to him straight away. I refused, of course, and he became a little threatening—said I could cause a major incident if I didn't comply."

"What did you do then?"

"I told him to go fuck himself, then hung the phone up."

"Nothing beats the subtle approach, Tom."

Tom grinned. "He was so up himself. What a prick."

"What a strange piece of equipment. What do you reckon, Tom? Government sanctioned? Or are we dealing with an independent contractor?"

"Beats me. Sounds like you've trodden on a few sore toes. I'd be looking out for people you've crossed swords with recently."

Vickers agreed. One person came to mind—his good old friend Willem Forster.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Immaculately dressed in full uniform, Deputy Commissioner Forster stood at the lectern in the media relations room in Darwin Police Headquarters as a makeup girl dabbed thick TV pancake on his face and three sound technicians fitted their microphones in front of him.

On the other side of the lectern stood a gaggle of TV cameramen with HD cameras on their shoulders, TV reporters, newspaper journalists, radio journalists, and stills photographers. “Feeding time at the zoo”, Forster called events like these. He surveyed the waiting media animals.

“And this will make tonight’s news?” Forster asked his media relations officer.

“Yes, sir,” she acknowledged, as she, the makeup girl, and the sound technicians all withdrew.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this first comment is off the record,” Forster began. “We know you would have heard that a senior CIB officer, the officer in charge of the Elizabeth Rivers murder inquiry, has today been suspended. I wanted to nip in the bud any false media

speculation about that situation. We want to make sure the public's confidence in their police force is not dented." He paused, and was immediately confronted with a sea of raised hands. "First, an official statement, then I'll answer questions."

The room fell silent again, and then Forster continued. "Let me say, police undergo quite unimaginable stresses, particularly when dealing with brutal crimes, and I would ask for your sympathy and consideration when reporting cases involving police officers and stress-related occurrences. I can assure you that the Rivers investigation is in good hands—the former deputy officer in charge of the inquiry, Detective Senior Sergeant Ward, has been given the temporary rank of Acting Detective Superintendent and he has taken over the reins on the inquiry. He is, of course, thoroughly versed in all aspects of the inquiry and has my fullest confidence."

"Wardy, it's Vickers. How are things in Darwin as Acting Superintendent?"

"Boring as shit, Boss. I know Forster's just using me as his puppet. What a slimeball. I don't know what you ever saw in him—he's as fake as a \$3 note. He's been asking me to go round for a scotch and snooker. I told him I've been brewing up a bellyache, but I can't keep that up for too long."

"Tony, it's not going to aid your promotion prospects, but I want you to do something irregular. It could save lives."

"Everything with you is irregular, Boss. If it involves beating up a 6'6" truck driver, the answer's no. Anything else is fine."

"Wardy, I want your bellyache to take a big turn for the worse. So bad that you'll have to take a day or two off work. Okay?"

"Suits me fine, Boss. I could do with a bit of time to read Spinoza's *Ethics*."

“Oh, god in heaven, a police superintendent reading Baruch Spinoza. What’s the world coming to? Do we need another fucking philosopher in this world?”

Vickers, who disliked Spinoza’s savage attack on Descartes’ mind–body dualism, couldn’t resist commenting. “He was only a lens grinder, for Christ’s sake—he rejected Descartes. They can’t both have been right.”

“A bit of a philosopher yourself, by the looks of things, Boss.”

“Nah. Not at all. I just recall seeing a TV program on him while I was flipping channels once.”

But Ward knew better. He’d seen works by Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, and Aristotle in Vickers’ car. Vickers was a voracious and rapid reader—this was probably one of the reasons he was such a good detective.

“Okay, Boss, I’ll take Spinoza’s critique on Descartes with a pinch of salt. Now, back to mundane matters—what cunning plan have you brewed up?”

“Not sure about the cunning part. Forster will see through it in a nanosecond. It might just spur things into action, though. Be prepared for a Forster-style tongue lashing. It goes something like this...”

Ward’s heart was beating fast as he walked up the spiral stairs that led to the two top offices. They both led off a large anteroom that held four office staff.

This was going to be an unpleasant meeting. At first he had thought about rejecting the whole idea. There had to be a better, more proper way of doing things, but he was loyal to Vickers—and, more to the point, in awe of his boss’s uncanny way of always being right when it came to crime solving. If there was such a thing as a

modern-day Aussie Sherlock Holmes, then Vickers was it—the real deal.

Ward was the typical university-educated career cop. There were rules and that was that. When he'd finished his degree in criminology—then topped it off with a Masters in Forensic and Computer Science—he thought he had all the tools to equip himself for every situation in crime-solving. The intuitive cops were dinosaurs, relics of the past who had their use-by date and should pass the baton on to the new wave of crime fighters, who had spectrosopes, olfactory sensors, scanning electron microscopes, and rapid DNA sequencing machines. You went to a crime scene, took the CSI operatives with you, collected evidence, and—hey presto—the villain was brought to justice. That was three years ago...

Then he was assigned to Frank Vickers.

Instead of using forensic science, Vickers had horse sense, a built-in bullshit detector, and an uncanny ability to point himself in the right direction time after time after time. While Ward allowed himself to be led off on wild goose chases, Vickers would stand by, smile indulgently, and metaphorically spin Ward around and point him in the right direction. After so many instances of science being wrong and intuition being right, Ward simply shrugged his shoulders and put his paper qualifications back in the drawer to gather dust while he watched the master at work.

Life as a police officer became much easier after that. Ward also learnt from Vickers how to handle himself in a fight. Karate, taekwondo, and other fancy martial arts looked good, but Vickers brought Ward down to earth with the words, "You'll still bleed with a bottle stuck in your head." And it proved to be so true.

When Vickers had described how he was going to get by Forster blocking the Rivers murder investigation, Ward was initially horrified. "You can't forge a deputy commissioner's signature. He's second in command for the Territory!"

Vickers had counted this with, “So we’ll let more people die, shall we, to keep things sweet with a bent commissioner?” There was no response to this. Of course, Vickers was right, and Ward just thought to himself, “Bugger my career. I’m going to do things the Vickers way.”

So, in the early afternoon, Tony Ward sat on a black leather couch in the deputy commissioner’s office as Forster poured two cups of coffee from a percolator on a sideboard.

“Sorry you weren’t feeling well yesterday...” said Forster. “You’re feeling better now?”

“Yes, sir, thank you.”

Forster was the epitome of friendliness. “Well, Tony. Good to see you again. Take the weight off your feet. Scotch?”

“No, thank you, sir—coffee’s fine.”

Forster placed a cup of coffee on the low table in front of Ward, then seated himself in a black leather chair with his own cup. “So, the Rivers murder. I know you’re going to wrap this case up with the minimum of delay, Superintendent.”

“I won’t be dragging my feet, sir,” he replied.

Forster smiled. “Good, good. I knew you were the right choice for the job. Of course, I won’t attempt to influence the course of your inquiry. That goes without saying, Tony. But you can fill me in on the direction you intend taking.” He leaned forward to stir his coffee, pouring in two sachets of Splenda.

“There have been some sensational new developments, and thanks to your foresight and intuition, we can safely say you were absolutely right.”

“Pardon me?”

“Well, sir, I had the autopsy done, as you requested, and you were right—Ray Dale was murdered. It was made to look like a heart attack, but he’d been drained of blood, just as you thought. I have to say that I admire your intuition.”

Forster's face was turning a funny puce colour. He looked like a pressure cooker with a blocked safety valve.

"Autopsy—I never ordered any autopsy. What in fuck's name has been going on?"

All bonhomie had disappeared, replaced by a small, irritable child who had been given the wrong colour sprinkles on his dessert.

"Sir, you faxed me the request to have the autopsy done on Ray Dale. Here it is, sir. I did exactly what you asked. I even had to get the pathologist to come in at five am. He was irritated, but your promise of a week's holiday if he did the autopsy immediately worked. His conclusion was unequivocally that Ray Dale died of exsanguination. I called the crime unit and set things in motion straight away, while I was at home ill. Is anything wrong, sir? You look a little ill yourself. I hope I haven't passed something on to you. I wouldn't forgive myself if I have."

"You fucking stupid idiot. I never sent you any fax and you damn well know it. That's a fake." Realisation dawned on Forster's face. "You're in cahoots with Vickers, aren't you, you dirty little prick."

"Absolutely not, sir. I just carried out your instructions to the letter. I have proof now that we have a serial killer. I also, as you suggested in your fax, just sent a brief message to the press advising them of the findings, and of course explained it was your brilliant deduction that led to the discovery."

"You think you've won, Ward. Well you haven't. I'm still in charge and I've just knocked you back to sergeant. And I'm not done by a long chalk. That fax was a forgery and I'm going to go to the media and tell them that. That'll throw a spanner in Vickers' works. He thinks he's good, but watch me, shithead. I'm better. I've got a press conference to go to, and believe me, it'll be convincing. I hope you like street vending, because that's where your career's going. Now, fuck off, Sergeant Ward."

Vickers was sitting at the small utility table in the motel room, two cups of cold instant coffee and a pile of empty gum wrappers in front of him. This was his best attempt to keep away from cigarettes. Next to his beloved fountain pen, a piece of paper contained a list of all the anomalies Vickers had found in the case so far. One day of having been suspended was already beginning to show in his edgy fidgeting.

He had got to the door in three steps when the knock came. “So, how did it go, Wardy?”

Ward let out a big sigh. “I thought he was going to have a stroke. Said I was going to be street vending. He went ballistic. I thought he was going to throw me out of the window. He knocked me back to sergeant and said he had only just got started. If you thought he was going to crawl off into a corner and lick his wounds, you underestimated him.”

Vickers shook his head. “I never thought he’d just give in—these Boers are a lot tougher than that. The situation’s a lot better than before, though. Now he’s the one in damage control, not me. Did you get a decent recording?”

“Nothing in the conversation that implicated him. He’s too clever for that. But if you’re going to the media like you said, then you can at least play the recording. If nothing else, it makes him sound like the dick he is.”

“There’s hope for you yet, Wardy. You’re starting to sound like a real detective. Sorry your superintendent status only lasted a day.”

“No big deal, sir. It was worth it to see that buffoon almost burst a blood vessel. I really did think he was going to have a stroke.”

The two men grinned, both relishing the imagery of Forster in extreme discomfort.

“I’ve been doing some research of my own, sir. I think you’ll find it interesting.”

Vickers looked up at Ward, smiling. “Go for it, Wardy. I’m all ears.”

“Well, sir. You’ve used YouTube before?” Vickers nodded. “Do you know who owns YouTube?”

“I don’t, but I’m willing to bet it’s Microsoft, Apple, or Google.”

“Google. When most people sign into Google or Gmail, they’re automatically signed into YouTube, and vice versa. The Albinoni music that was played at the Rivers house was played via YouTube. It got me thinking whether any of the other victims had YouTube videos played at their houses at the time they either disappeared or died—and guess what I found?”

“They all had similar music played?”

“More than that: Ray Dale, George Stapleton, and five other victims’ computers had downloaded the same passage of Albinoni. The same passage! It’s as if the murderer has a routine, or a ritual. Why Albinoni? Why that passage? Anyway, I did as much research as I could on Albinoni, his life, whether there are other bizarre occurrences associated with his music, but I couldn’t find anything concrete.”

“Go on, I’m intrigued.”

“Well, it turns out all online YouTube plays are logged by Google. Basically, they keep a record of the sort of thing you like, then target advertising for the user. When I delved into Ray Dale’s computer habits, all I could find was that he listened to Aussie Country and Western on a variety of sites. Never a hint of classical music—that is, until the approximate time of his death, then the Albinoni download. And George Stapleton—no classical music until the time of his death. The rock musician—I checked his YouTube, and found Albinoni again at around the time he disappeared from his caravan trailer. Nearly all the haemophiliacs who died in the Northern Territory seemed to die to Albinoni.”

“Wardy, that’s proper detective work. I’m impressed. How did you get access to the accounts without a court order?”

Ward looked sheepish. “I had all their personal data—date of birth, family members, address—piece of cake.”

“And completely illegal. I’m proud of you. I said I’d make a detective out of you and it looks as if I’ve succeeded. So, tell me, what’s your take on this composer? Reckon it’s a ritual, or is there some other reason for the behaviour?”

“Sir, your gut feeling is that this is a big operation. Something well financed and organised. If that’s the case, then this is unlikely to just be a Northern Territory operation. If so, there’d be contractors in various areas. Maybe just Australia—maybe worldwide. That’s something we should look into. To kill a person in this way requires a particularly cold and heartless individual. A psychopath. Someone with no empathy, no feeling for others.

“All killers have their own peculiarities. If you look at the BTK, Ted Bundy, Gacy, they all had their own odd rituals. My thoughts are that our killer is just the same. He’s got the same mindset as any other serial killer, but he’s found a way of getting paid for it. Anyway, I did some research to see if anything in Albinoni’s past had anything to do with his relatives or friends with a bleeding disorder—nothing. I think this man simply gets off on watching people die and listening to Albinoni. If that is true, maybe we’ve found a chink in his armour. If nothing else, it gives us another facet to his personality.”

“Wardy, maybe he doesn’t just listen to that music when he’s killing someone. Perhaps he listens to it all the time. Maybe we can do some research into who’s downloading that music and see if a pattern emerges. I’m kicking myself that I never thought about doing that. Good on you. That was inspired police work.”

Ward felt the warmth spread of pride, but stifled the smile that was bursting to show itself. Praise like that from Vickers was manna from heaven. Ward kept his poker face and, in a deferential way, said, “Well, I’ve been taught by the best.”

“Yeah, yeah. You did very well. Now show me it’s not just a flash in the pan.”

Again, Ward stifled his smile. This was Vickers' way of saying "fucking brilliant".

"So what now, sir? I've had my wings clipped—I'll probably be on traffic duty tomorrow..."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that. Forster's going to be answering a lot of questions over the next two days, he's not going to waste time getting even with you. He'll be going for my throat, though. I'd better get the knife in first."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I think it's time I got myself on television or radio. Email me that recording as soon as you can. I've got to book a flight to Sydney."



CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Frank's breath was almost taken away as Julia walked into the room, but he did his best to remain professional. "I need to update you about the murders. Forster is as bent as a dog's hind leg. He holds all the cards—at the moment he's got me over a barrel, but if he thinks I'll roll over and die, he'll find out otherwise. I'll nail that bastard to the floorboards through his kneecaps."

"Frank, just contact the media. Send it anonymously, if necessary. Call the TV channels. They'll run with that story for sure."

"Don't kid yourself, Jules. They'd dismiss an anonymous letter like that as the ravings of a madman. The population of the Northern Territory is half a million. On a national scale, we don't even figure. If that sort of thing gets on local TV, it'll just look like a bunch of lunatic bogans coming out with a prank. No, this has to be bigger. I'm going to Sydney."

"So, when do we set off?"

"What you mean, 'we'?"

"I'm going with you. End of story."

Vickers shook his head. "I'm just going to do an interview, then come back. There's no point you coming with me."

"I'm beginning to think you don't really trust my worth, Frank."

"Julia, believe me, please. I'm doing my best to expose you to as little danger as possible. There's a psychopathic criminal out there, and I don't want you caught up in anything." Vickers wanted to tell Julia about the death of Amanda Tate and the possibility that everyone around him might be a target, but he couldn't bring himself to explain.

Julia's stared back at him with an expression that was both hurt and angry. "I humiliated myself the other night, Frank. Do you think I throw myself at any man who comes my way? Do you know how it feels to be rejected?"

"I didn't reject you, I..."

"You did reject me. I felt like a tramp."

Vickers put his hands around Julia's slender waist and pulled her close to him. "If you only knew how wrong you are."

"Well, tell me then. Don't you fancy me?"

"Of course I do. I want you more than anything else in the world. You're my idea of perfection. Even if you had two heads, wrinkled skin, and bad breath, I'd—look, Jules, this is really difficult for me to say."

Julia stared into his eyes, waiting for him to continue.

"I can't get the image of you out of my head. Wherever I go and whatever I do, you're there. I even see you in my dreams. I'm obsessed with you. I want to hold you and stroke that beautiful blonde hair. I want to breathe in your aroma. I want to touch your soft skin. You're everything I've ever dreamt about, everything I've fantasised about, everything I've yearned for."

Julia started to talk but her voice was trembling. "I don't understand, Frank. That's exactly how I feel for you. Why didn't you want me when I wanted you?"

“I did. That’s the whole problem. There was nothing in the world I wanted more, but it’s so very, very complicated.”

“Try me!”

“Jules. I’ve just come out of a totally failed marriage. My wife and I hadn’t had sex for years before we divorced, and I started doubting myself. Then we separated. I desperately needed the comfort and touch of a woman. I needed to feel like a man again. I wanted the physical pleasure that was no longer part of my life. But I couldn’t bear the prospect of another failed marriage. I had to find female company where I wouldn’t be judged. That I didn’t have to beg for. That would always be there when I needed it.”

Realisation spread across Julia’s face. She whispered, “Prostitutes?”

“Yes. I pay money to have sex. Afterwards, I’m okay for a while, until the demons come knocking on my door again. Then I spiral back into turmoil. I often don’t use protection, and I don’t even know my hepatitis or HIV status—it’s been months since I got tested. Can you imagine what was going through my mind the other day? To possibly give the woman I—the woman I—”

Julia pulled him closer.

“Say it, Frank.”

“The woman I love.”

Vickers pulled away from Julia, dumped himself into a chair, and leaned forward with his face buried in his hands.

“The woman I love, the woman I love.”

She came up behind him and held his head to her breast, stroking his hair. “Oh, Frank, you loveable, adorable fool. Why didn’t you say this before?”

“Because I’m ashamed of what I’ve become. You deserve a lot better. I would have given my right arm to have had sex with you that day. But to possibly infect you with something horrible? No—never.”

Julia continued to caress Vickers’ hair. Had there been a hole he could have crawled into, he would happily have done so.

“Let me take you somewhere, Frank. I might have the answer to our problem.”

Vickers, as if in a dream, let himself be led out of the hotel and into Julia’s car.

Soon, they were at the hospital. They walked through the corridors to a locked office, which Julia opened, waving Vickers in. Two minutes later, having switched on a series of machines, she asked Vickers to roll up his sleeve. He did as he was asked, with just a faint look of suspicion. She took a few blood samples, then put the tubes in a centrifuge and set the RPM to 3500 for ten minutes. Vickers didn’t say a word—he just watched Julia work. She took some of the centrifuged plasma out of the blood tubes and squirted small quantities into the machines.

“This is what we call a Rapid PCR test, Frank. It stands for Rapid Polymerase Chain Reaction. It looks for DNA and it can amplify even tiny amounts. It’ll tell us whether you have anything... interesting.”

“You’re the boss, Jules.”

Half an hour later, a slightly smug Julia declared Vickers to be completely free of any diseases.

“I don’t know how you’ve escaped, but you don’t have a hint of any STDs.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s those tough Scottish genes, Jules.”

“Now it’s my turn, Frank.”

“What?”

“If you’ve been tested, then I’m going to be tested as well.”

“There’s no need, Jules—I never even let that thought enter my mind.”

“If we’re going to start off on a clean slate, we both need to know exactly what the status quo is.”

“Forget it, Jules.”

“No Frank, I will do the test, then we both know exactly where we stand.”

Vickers didn’t want her to subject herself to the indignity, but he could see that when Julia made up her mind, resistance was useless. The tests came back negative, of course.

“What now, Frank?”

“Well, Dr Delaney, I think we should celebrate, but before we do, there’s one thing that I need to do first.”

With that, Vickers raised his right hand as would a policeman stopping traffic.

“I, Francis Alan Vickers, do solemnly swear that I will never, ever, sleep with a hooker again. And even if you run off with the local football team and never see me again, I will never again pay for sex.”

When they returned to Julia’s house, they hugged and kissed and laughed for a long time. The lovemaking afterwards was passionate, relaxed, and more spiritually satisfying than either of them had ever experienced before. Maybe it was the danger they had been involved in; maybe they simply chemically and emotionally clicked. There was no awkwardness or insecurity. This was not a sex act—it was lovemaking in the true sense of the word, lovemaking that went on giving pleasure for hours, providing not just ecstasy but an existential experience.

They were completely physically and emotionally drained afterwards, falling deeply asleep in each other’s arms.



CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Esta Vansen was *The Vansen Report*, and *The Vansen Report* was one of the top-rating shows for current affairs. She was shrewd, and sometimes lewd, but always a woman to command respect.

She had joined the *Behind The News* current affairs program when she had been only twenty-five. With her Scandinavian good looks, intelligence, and ambition, it had only been a matter of time before Esta had her own program.

Now, *The Vansen Report* had held the best ratings for its time slot for six years straight, and she had every intention it would continue to do so for at least six more.

She considered the man opposite her with interest and just a modicum of sexual desire. He was good-looking in a macho kind of way, and could probably be charming, but at the moment, his passion was for her program and what could be aired on it.

“Apart from the other things we’ve agreed to, it has to go to air tonight,” Frank Vickers said adamantly as he sat across the desk in

Vansen's Sydney office. "Otherwise, forget the whole thing. Anything could happen between now and Monday night."

"Tonight? A Saturday night?" she asked with a scowl. "Look, I can't promise anything. I'll have to talk to our programming director about putting a special edition of *The Vansen Report* to air tonight."

"Tonight, or not at all," said Vickers. "I'm not giving you your interview only to find you end up using it next month some time. If you can't go to air tonight with it, I'll find another network that will."

"Frank, Frank, don't worry. I'm sure there won't be a problem," she assured him. "But I have to make it very clear—this must be exclusive to *The Vansen Report*. You'll have to give me your word you won't talk to anyone else in the media. Not another TV station, not the papers, not anyone. Do I have your word on that?"

Vickers nodded. "You have my word." He stood, reaching across the desk. She shook his hand, thinking how quaintly old-fashioned this outback cop was with his firm handshake. She wouldn't want to mess with him.

Around noon, Vickers was led from a makeup room, along several lofty corridors, then into a television studio on Sydney's North Shore.

Esta Vansen appeared shortly after, a clipboard in hand, smiling broadly. "Did they tell you? We're putting a special thirty-minute Vansen Report to air tonight at 8:30." Around them, technicians prepared to record the interview.

"Good. Then let's get on with it."

"Sounds good." She sat down in front of him. "Just a few questions before we start taping. You said you have new evidence in the Rivers case?"

Vickers reached inside his jacket and produced a manila envelope. "In here you'll find the names of nine other people in the Northern Territory who have died in the last few weeks. All are linked by a

common medical factor, as you'll see. This is also a list of over a hundred more potential victims—for your eyes only. Do not under any circumstances broadcast those names or mention the linking factor—that would only cause panic.”

Vansen nodded. “I understand.”

“Most importantly, in this envelope you will find the results of an unofficial autopsy on the most recent victim, conducted only yesterday.”

“And...?”

“He died in exactly the same way as Elizabeth Rivers.”

“Yet, according to you, the most senior levels of the Northern Territory Police are suppressing this information?”

“That’s why I’m here,” said Vickers, handing her the envelope.

Earlier in the week, *The Vansen Report* had run a story about non-disabled people parking in disabled spaces. A seemingly innocuous subject had been made sensational by hiding cameras opposite disabled parking spaces at shopping centres around Sydney, filming obviously able people parking in them. Reporters had then confronted them with a camera and microphone. The episode had rated through the roof and the subject had dominated talkback radio all week. This was what *The Vansen Report* was all about: ratings, as well as subjects people wanted to talk about.

And tonight’s special would put the disabled parking story in the shade.

Esta Vansen and her executive producer shut themselves away behind Vansen’s closed office door. The pair had viewed the footage from the interview with Frank Vickers, and now they watched as Vansen made a telephone call. “His name is Forster, Willem Forster,” said the producer, a sour-faced woman in her late thirties.

Vansen identified herself, then asked to be connected with Deputy Commissioner Willem Forster as a matter of urgency. Her call was diverted to Forster's mobile phone, and when the deputy commissioner answered, Vansen pressed the conference call button, so everyone could listen in, then replaced the receiver. Sitting back in her tall black leather chair, Vansen introduced herself. She told him that *The Vansen Report* that night would be running a special story on the Elizabeth Rivers murder.

"Oh, yes, Esta," said Forster guardedly. He knew who Esta Vansen was, and was familiar with her ball-breaking reputation.

Vansen informed him their conversation was being recorded and the report would include an interview with an anonymous informant who had made some startling allegations about the way the Northern Territory Police were handling the Elizabeth Rivers case.

"What anonymous informant?" Forster demanded.

"He would no longer be anonymous if I told you that, Deputy Commissioner," Vansen retorted.

"It doesn't matter—I've a pretty good idea who we're talking about here," said Forster. "Go on. What did he have to say, this anonymous informant?"

"He said you were given new evidence in the Rivers case, but you chose not to do anything with it. Is that correct?"

"I wouldn't call it new evidence," Forster replied.

"What would you call it, then?"

"I'd say that it was nonsense."

"Our informant says there have been more murders. He claims there's a serial killer on the loose who may have murdered up to ten people."

"Ten? Christ almighty, Esta, I hope you're not foolish enough to put that on TV. You can't go putting the fear of God into people with this silly talk of vampires and serial killers! I can't believe you'd be that irresponsible."

Vansen bristled. "I never said anything about vampires."

The producer now leaned across the desk and tapped the copy of the Factor 8 list that Vansen had in front of her.

Vansen nodded. "I have a list of people linked by a common factor," she told Forster, "ten of whom have died recently."

"Elizabeth Rivers was the only one to die under suspicious circumstances," Forster countered. "And her death is currently the subject of a homicide investigation. End of story."

"But there was a common denominator linking all these people. Isn't that beyond a coincidence?"

"You're talking about haemophilia, I assume?"

Vansen sat forward. "You know about that link, then?"

Forster chuckled. "Listen, Esta, Elizabeth Rivers wasn't a haemophiliac."

Vansen frowned. "She wasn't? Are you sure?"

"For your information, Elizabeth Rivers suffered from a rare condition called von Willebrand's disease. She was not a haemophiliac. This story about haemophiliacs being bumped off by a serial killer is a load of garbage!"

"Why would anyone make up a thing like that if it was so patently false?"

"You tell me. Some people have big chips on their shoulders, Esta. Why don't you ask your anonymous informer who he was in the company of two nights ago—and what happened to her. And then ask yourself what sort of quality of person you're getting on your show."

Vansen looked at her producer, her earlier certainty dissipating. "What about the autopsy on Raymond Dale?"

"That autopsy was tampered with. The results have been thrown out. Believe me, Mr Dale died of natural causes."

"Thrown out? You're sure?"

"Who are you going to believe, Esta? The Northern Territory Police and several very experienced doctors who have ruled that no suspicious circumstances were involved in all the deaths you have

mentioned, or some anonymous informant who obviously has an axe to grind?”

Vansen asked a few more questions, but something about the way Forster had answered had put doubt in her mind. After she'd hung up, she sat thinking, weighing the differing stories.

“What do you think?” asked her producer. “Which version do we go with? The suspended superintendent's, or his boss's?”

Vansen shrugged. “We're not judge and jury. We're journalists.” She smiled. “We go with the version that makes the best story. But we have to cover our butts.”

“No time like the present.” She pulled her computer towards her. “I'll just do a Google search, then you can follow it up if there's anything of interest.”

Within seconds, she had googled von Willebrand's disease and turned to the Wiki page. She scanned through the notes quickly, a broad grin crossing her features. “Why, the wily old buzzard,” she chuckled. “I wonder what that means.”

Swivelling around on her chair, she faced her producer, thinking. “Forster's obviously got something to hide. Oh, baby, we can get so much mileage out of this.” She went on for the benefit of her puzzled companion. “Von Willebrand is haemophilia. One and the same. He's just rolled himself in it. Now, how shall we handle this? Maybe clip that little bit of dynamite onto the end and get mileage for another show and tell tomorrow, eh?”

Eyes glued to the TV screen, Vickers sat in his room at the Darling Harbour Novotel Hotel. At 8:30, the opening titles to *The Vansen Report* rolled, then Esta Vansen's face filled the screen.

“Good evening, and thank you for joining me for this special edition of *The Vansen Report*,” she began. “In the past week, the Northern Territory's bizarre Elizabeth Rivers' murder case has

taken several sensational twists. The first was the suspension of the police officer in charge of the murder investigation, Detective Superintendent Frank Vickers. Now *The Vansen Report* brings you claims from a police insider which, if true, blow this case wide open and expose the possibility that Elizabeth Rivers is only one of several victims of a serial killer roaming the Northern Territory. Is this vampire murderer looking for more victims? More when we return after the break, exclusively on *The Vansen Report*.”

Later that night, Vickers was in the hotel room, watching TV. He waited uneasily as half a dozen commercials dragged by. Then Esta Vansen reappeared on the screen.

“Welcome back,” said Vansen. “Later in the program we’ll talk to a senior Northern Territory police spokesman, the head of the CIB there, and get his reaction to the claims you’re about to hear. We’ll also cross live to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s deputy director, Robert Kaylien, America’s leading expert on serial killers, who’s in Sydney to speak at an international criminology conference tomorrow. We’ll ask his opinion on the claim that the life of Elizabeth Rivers was taken by a serial killer. But first, we begin with the interview I recorded earlier today with our inside source. To ensure his anonymity, we have pixellated his face and altered his voice.”

Vickers sat in silence, staring at the television set. His interview, heavily edited, had come and gone. Mercifully, Vansen hadn’t included the issue of Amanda Tate. She didn’t do this out of kindness, of course—she just didn’t want to rubbish her own informant. That would have made him less credible, and fewer people would have been inclined to believe him—and that would have meant less controversy. Controversy sold advertising space.

The sound recording of portions of Willem Forster’s telephone conversation with Esta Vansen had played. Vansen finished off by pointing out that von Willebrand’s disease is a form of haemophilia, making Forster look either disingenuous or simply uninformed.

Feeling that Vansen had been reasonably balanced but not assertive enough, Vickers reached to turn the television off. He hesitated. Now there was an American on the screen, Robert Kaylien, the FBI Deputy Director, talking about his speciality: serial killers.

Kaylien was a pleasant-faced man in his early forties with short, brown hair. He looked more like a bank manager than a top cop. Sitting in a hotel room and talking live to camera, he was deftly answering Vansen's questions as she sought to confirm Vickers' claims about a serial killer.

When Vansen asked whether in all his years with the FBI he had ever heard of a serial killer who killed his victims by draining them of blood, Kaylien answered, "No, I have to say that would be a new one on me."

The camera came back to Esta, who now sat like the cat who has the cream. "And yet, *The Vansen Report* has come up with some startling new evidence to show that experts and police are purposefully trying to obfuscate the facts and mislead the public. Tune in on Monday for the conclusion of our exclusive interviews and findings on the vampire murders."

Vickers called Ward, who was staying in the next room. "You saw?"

"I saw," he replied.

"What's your take on it?"

"If the objective was to put Forster on the spot, sir, I have to say it could have been stronger."

"Yeah, Wardy—not the power behind it I'd hoped for. Believe me, Wardy, I have many more aces up my sleeve."

"Frank, I never doubted that for a second."



CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

“**T**here we go,” Vickers said, “Random House Publishers. *Plutarch’s Roman Emperors and Morals.*”

“How recently was it published, and what’s the price?” Julia asked.

“First published in January 2015, but didn’t become freely available until May.”

“Call the publishers and find out when their distributors first sent the books to Australia.”

Although the publisher wasn’t that helpful, the receptionist did give some further information on their international distributors. After some more Google searches, Vickers finally came across a link to airport duty free outlets.

And there, tight at the bottom of the page: Almark Sydney International Airport Duty Free. *Plutarch’s Roman Emperors and Morals*. 2015. \$9.

“Well, well, well.” Vickers couldn’t help but grin at his discovery.

“It says it was made available a few weeks ago. I can’t see them selling many of these books. Almark Duty Free might have useful

sales lists—and if we’re really lucky, the perp might have paid for it with his credit card. You never know. Worth a call.”

Vickers drove off to Sydney Airport, heading to Almark’s administrative offices. He was put in touch with a friendly lady in public relations, Celia Vallis. Vickers showed her his duplicate police ID card—always handy to have in case of suspension—and told her he needed her help involving a duty-free matter and a case he was working on.

Then he began to spin her the story. He was about to give her highly confidential information, he confided, and asked for her guarantee it would go no further. Celia said she was all ears, and of course what he told her would remain completely confidential.

Vickers went on to explain that he had been trying to track down a man who had abducted his two children, leaving the poor wife distressed and distraught.

“That’s terrible!” Celia exclaimed. “The poor woman.”

If he hadn’t already hooked her, at least he was close to it. With growing confidence, he told Celia that this woman was desperate to get her children back. He believed the husband had left the country at the end of May and had taken the children to a foreign country and left them there, probably with plans to join them again soon. Until recently, he had no idea which country. But then, a stroke of luck—he had been tipped off that the man was staying in New York. But, just as he was about to catch up with him, he had slipped away.

“No!” Celia said, shocked. By now, she was completely involved in the story.

Vickers nodded. “But in his haste, he left behind his packed suitcase. In that suitcase, I found a book: *Plutarch’s Roman Emperors and Morals*. On the back of the book, I found a price sticker. The sticker had the word ASIA printed on it, and a price of \$9.”

“ASIA?” Celia queried. Her eyes widened. “That’s one of ours. Our price labels have AMIA, ABIA, APIA and ASIA on them – for our airport outlets at Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Sydney. ASIA stands for Almark Sydney International Airport.”

“Okay!” said Vickers, trying to sound as if this was news to him—but also relieved that Celia had bought his story.

“Now, Celia, I’m sure you’ll understand that I want to find this man and his poor children, and to do that, I need to trace the sale of this book to a particular day and time, between June 1st and last Tuesday.”

“Was he back in America by last Tuesday? The husband, I mean?”

Vickers had to think quickly. Celia had quickly grasped his tale in all its fabricated detail. “That’s right. With that sales data, we’ll be able to pinpoint when our man arrived in Australia and link his arrival to a specific flight.”

“Well, our stock control system is pretty sophisticated, but we can’t identify individual sales. I could give you the date and time of every sale of that product between June 1st and 9th, but we could be talking scores of purchases, depending how popular it was.” Celia thought for a moment. “Why don’t you just ask the airlines whether this man flew with them?”

An amateur detective. “If only it were that easy, Celia. Airlines don’t release passenger lists without court orders. By the time I get one, this swine could be anywhere. I have to help this woman. You have no idea what she’s going through. Besides, do you think he would have booked seats for himself and the children in their own names? False passports aren’t hard to get. No, this man is a real slippery one.”

“Oh, how stupid am I? Of course. That’s why you’re the detective and I’m in PR.”

“This book is quite a rare one, Celia,” he went on. “We could only be talking about one or two sales. I know this isn’t a request you’d receive every day, but do you think you could give me those sales details?”

“Well, I suppose we’re not talking about confidential data, are we?” she responded. “Okay, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll go down to stock control and see if I can get them to bring up the records. Mr Vickers, come on down with me and we’ll sort something out.”

The stock control clerk was equally cooperative. “Which dates you were interested in again?”

“Since June 1st.”

“June 1st? Looks like it was only released that day. There weren’t many sales of that book for the period you’re looking at—only six, in fact. All from the arrivals shop.” The clerk went on to reel off details of the half-dozen book sales at Almark’s Sydney International Airport outlet between the dates concerned, with the day and precise time of day of each sale.

Vickers scribbled down the information onto a small motel notepad. “That’s great, Celia,” he said once he’d finished.

“Do you think you can nail down an arrival time and date from that?” she asked with genuine concern.

“It’s one of the six. That’s a whole lot closer to nailing it than before I spoke to you. We’ll pinpoint it one way or another. Thanks a million for your help, Celia.”

“I’m sorry we can’t do any more to help. Good luck, Mr Vickers. I hope that lady gets her children back.”

“Don’t you worry, Celia, I always get my man. He’s as good as caught.”

On re-reading the dates and times he had noted down, he stopped when he came to a sale at 7:05 on the morning of Friday June 5th, four days before the death of Elizabeth Rivers. The next sale after that had been on June 11th, two days after her death. A June 5th purchase would have given the buyer ample time to reach Dorset Creek and commit the murder.

A map of Australia appeared in Vickers' mind. He pictured the murderer arriving in Sydney early on the morning of Friday June 5th, then flying inland to Alice Springs either that same day or the next to purchase the VW on Saturday June 6th. Then he saw the mystery man driving to Dorset Creek with a couple of days to spare before he carried out his first murder. Plenty of time to prepare and find his victim.

Again Vickers picked up his phone, this time dialling the number for Sydney Airport administration. He told the woman who answered that he needed to know the details of all international flights that had arrived at Sydney from 6:35am on June 5th, calculating that the *Plutarch* purchaser would have easily been able to make it into the duty-free area within that thirty-minute window.

He was connected to a woman who cheerfully gave him the details of all three flights that had arrived within the timeframe on the day in question: a Qantas flight from London via Singapore that had been running an hour late, a United Airlines flight from Los Angeles via Hawaii, and a Japanese Airlines flight from Tokyo.

Vickers studied the flight details. All three flights had arrived within ten minutes of each other, and he estimated there was time for passengers from all three to have reached the Almark duty-free store by 7:05. He could be looking at as many as a thousand potential buyers. What he really needed now was the passenger lists from those flights.

He made his way back to the hotel to mull over things and chat with Julia about the next plan of attack.

He poured himself a scotch. It was early—some may have said drinking at this time was a red flag, but like Sherlock Holmes, he needed a drug to concentrate on difficult problems. In Holmes' case, it was cocaine and tobacco; in Vickers' case, it was fine quality scotch. Many a criminal was now languishing in jail, thanks to Vickers' vice.

"Why would that mad bastard want all that blood?" He stared into his scotch glass, swirling around the amber liquid, mesmerised

by the way the fluid clung momentarily to the inside wall of the glass, then dropped downwards, leaving faint little trails.

Julia frowned slightly. “This man obviously isn’t mad. I think he’s probably just professionally detached, a bit like a sniper. This blood is obviously for a purpose, right? So he’s got to kill people for their blood and somehow forget about them being human.” She paused, thinking. “Someone wants blood—the blood of haemophiliacs, it seems—in large quantities. This has got to be the work of a team—a very well-organised team. Maybe we should be concentrating on Forster. If he is actually working with them, maybe he’s the key? But why would he work with them? Could they have threatened his wife and kids?”

“He was pretty vicious to me and Ward. It sounded almost like he was enjoying doing battle. If someone’s kids are in danger, they behave totally differently. I’ve had a couple of cases of bank managers having their wives and kids kidnapped so the crims could gain access to the bank vaults. Both times, the parents were so nervous they could hardly get a sentence out of their mouths. They tremble. They behave like frightened animals. Forster was the complete opposite. No, his family hasn’t been threatened. I think this is financial. He’s been compromised by payment or some other factor.”

Julia’s eyes lit up. “Frank! That’s what it might be—factor..”

“Pardon me?”

“All haemophiliacs receive Factor 8 injections. It’s the substance that stops them bleeding to death. Maybe Factor 8—I don’t know, I’m thinking on the spot here—maybe it causes some change after a period of time and they want the antibodies, or possibly stem cells. The thing is, why would they need to kill people? All they’d have to do is offer people money for blood donations. There’d be so many people in India and China who’d sell their blood for next to nothing.”

“You know, Jules, all victims have another commonality. You said all the people who’ve died from acute blood loss get acute renal

tubular necrosis. That's shock, isn't it? Shock causes huge amounts of adrenaline and other substances to be produced, right?"

Julia looked at Vickers with a huge smile and obvious surprise. "That's very perceptive. I'm impressed."

"Well, I did do a double masters in criminology and forensics. We learnt a little bit about adrenaline levels, to get an idea of whether the victim was under stress before death."

"You maybe on to something. I can't think of a way that adrenaline would affect the blood, but it's worth looking into. That's brilliant, Frank. You're thinking like a pathologist. I can't believe I never saw that one."

They sat in silent for a moment, mulling over their realisation.

Then Frank continued, "Jules, what we need is a computer hacker. We can track that bastard. He's definitely from abroad. That's how these things work. People are brought in from another country to do the dirty deed. They haven't got any fingerprints on record, they can't easily be identified because they don't live here, and associates can't finger them. Any traces they leave at a crime scene are almost impossible to tie up. All the gangland contract killings are done by fly-in, fly-out Russians, Poles, or South Americans. So much so, that when there's a killing, we check for Customs data from those countries. We can't prove anything, of course, but we're constantly building up a database. This person won't be from any of those countries, though. He needs to get close to the victims. He needs to fit in. His English will be perfect—he's got to be a native speaker. That means Canada, USA, South Africa, England—any English-speaking country."

"New Zealand?" Julia offered.

"Nah—New Zealand shares information with Australia." He thought for a moment. "He's probably between thirty and fifty, white. We know he's got some medical training. Maybe a paramedic or maybe a field medic in the armed forces. Possibly even a police officer—maybe that's the connection with Forster. Unfortunately, I can't access the police databases any more—I'm just Joe Citizen right

now. No—we need a computer guru. Someone who can break into databases.”

Julia thought about this for a minute, then blurted out, “Nolan. Joey Nolan—that’s who we want!” Julia beamed from ear to ear.

“Who the devil is Joey Nolan?”

“He was a patient of mine in Dorset Creek. Irish. He wasn’t just good at computers; he was the Roger Federer of computers. Did a three-year prison stretch for hacking into the Australian Customs database and defrauding them of millions. His older brother talked him into changing Customs’ records on goods he was importing to make it look like the duty and GST had been paid. He didn’t even do it for the money, though—just the challenge. They would have gotten away with it, too, if they’d confined it to the brother’s business. But the brother got greedy and began selling Joey’s services. One of those was a Customs agent.” She shrugged. “Joey lived in Dorset Creek for a while. He was Amroc’s top computer programmer. A few months ago, he came into a lot of money and moved to the Blue Mountains—that’s only twenty miles from here. We could be there in forty minutes. I still have the patient database on my phone.”

Julia unlocked her Samsung and opened up the medical program and searched under “N”.

“Here we go. Nolan, Joseph Sean. Date of birth, June 8th, 1974. Jobs-Gates Manor, 17 Blackheath Road, Katoomba, 2780.”

“Jobs-Gates Manor?”

Julia shrugged. “Joey’s idols?”

“And this Nolan fella is really good?”

“Yes.”

That was enough for Vickers. “So, if this Joey could hack into a government computer, maybe he could hack into an airline computer.”

“No harm in trying him.”



CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

An hour later, they pulled up in front of Jobs-Gates Manor, a beautiful old house with manicured gardens. In the long gravel drive was a new Range Rover Sport.

“Jules, this guy looks successful. He’s not going to want to do anything to jeopardise this. We’re going to have to soften him up—good cop, bad cop, but with a few alterations. It’s dawn. He’ll be drowsy. When he thinks the police are here, he’ll shit himself. We have to keep the thought in his mind that he’s in trouble with the law—he’s done a stretch and won’t be in a hurry to go back to prison. When he realises he’s not in trouble, he’ll experience a huge wave of relief. It’ll leave him vulnerable and cooperative.” Vickers looked around. “There’s a security camera there. He’ll check that before he opens the door. I don’t want him seeing you straight away, so turn your back to the camera as soon as I’ve rung the bell. That way he’ll think you’re just an assistant.”

Vickers started hammering on the door. After a while, they saw a light come on and heard noises, as if someone was banging into things.

Eventually they heard a voice. “Who is it?”



Vickers replied, "Police. Detective Superintendent Vickers, Serious Crimes Squad. Open the door!"

The two of them could almost hear Nolan hyperventilating. After a second, the door finally opened on a chain. Nolan's face was white.

Vickers produced his police ID. Julia deliberately turned sideways, so that she was in poor light.

"Joseph Sean Nolan?" said Vickers in his most menacing and official manner.

"Er, yes, officer. Yes, I'm Joey Nolan. What's this all about? I haven't done anything wrong. Is everything okay? Has anyone been injured?"

Vickers kept a poker face and said nothing. The tension on Nolan's face was obvious and excruciating. Nolan continued, "I haven't done anything wrong. What's up? Why are you here?"

It was at this point that Julia turned around. There was silence for a painful few seconds as Nolan first recognised Julia, then took in the fact she was stood outside his house at four o'clock in the morning.

"Dr Delaney? Is that you? What's going on? Why are you here with the police? Has anyone been hurt? Is it bad news?" He was blabbering again, and he was getting the shakes.

"We need to come in and talk to you, Joey. It's a serious matter. I think you should sit down." Joey's mouth had dropped open. He motioned for the pair to come in to the beautifully designed house, then slumped onto one of the large leather Chesterfields, awaiting what was obviously doom.

“Joey. I’m sorry to visit so early in the morning and I hope you understand that there was no other way we could arrange things.” Julia paused, giving him time to process what she was saying. “We need your help. It’s a matter of life or death, and you’re the only person I know who can help.”

Julia and Vickers witnessed the realisation dawn on Joey’s face. All he could do was mutter, “Oh thank God. Thank God—you came for my help? I thought it was going to be bad news. I’ll do anything you want, Dr Delaney. Anything at all. Just name it.”

Vickers glanced at Julia, his face filled with triumph. Julia only felt shame and pity.

“Joey. There’s a murderer on the loose. He’s killed a lot of people, and Superintendent Vickers is trying to track him down.”

Joey raised his eyebrows. He was starting to relax. “Superintendent eh, then why do you need my help?”

“We can’t get what we need from the police computer experts”

“They’re no experts, they’re shite. I can beat any so-called police computer gurus in my sleep. Truth be told, it wasn’t their skills that got me found out, it was my idiot of a brother in law, who got greedy...”

“Joey” Julia interjected.

“Sorry doc. What’s the problem? Blowfish password need cracking? Computer’s been wiped and you want me to retrieve the data?”

“We need you to break into the Australian Customs database.”

At first Joey just let out a nervous laugh. “Seriously, Doc, what do you need me to do?” After a few seconds of silence, Joey seemed to realise that Julia was dead serious.

“Dr D, you know that me and the Australian Customs aren’t exactly friends. If I got caught doing that again, I’d be looking at five years.”

Julia stayed silent.

“I can’t do that, Doc. I’ve got a house, a girlfriend, a young baby. I’ve got a successful company. Do you want me to blow all that?”

“When you got in trouble with the police, that was duty evasion. We’re not asking you do anything other than get information. People are dying—this serial killer has got to be stopped, Joey. You’re our last hope.”

Joey was shaking his head. “You’re asking too much, Doc. That’s the one thing I can’t do.” He paused. “Why can’t he just get a court order? Then I could do it—legally.” Nolan pointed at Vickers.

Vickers, never a man to shy away from an important situation, started speaking. “It’s like this, Nolan. This murderer has covered his tracks very well. My superiors don’t believe he exists, but Dr Delaney and I know that he does. He’s flown in recently from abroad. All we want you to do is get the Customs records for visitors who’ve arrived by plane. Dr Delaney says you’re the best. She tells me you’re good at covering your tracks, so no bullshit about you being worried about getting caught. Unless you’re not actually as good as she thinks you are.”

“Reverse psychology isn’t going to work with me, Superintendent. You’re going to have to find someone else—I’m out of the illegal trade, and I’m doing very nicely, thank you. I made \$1.5 million last year by selling my system to Amroc. No way I’m going to risk that on some wild goose chase that could end up with me in handcuffs again.”

Vickers cut in, bearing his teeth. “So you can’t do it, you pathetic cunt? I knew it. You’re all fucking talk.”

“Well, no, I can do it—I’m just not going to do it. There’s a way I could do it that would be untraceable, but then there’s the little problem of getting past the Customs password protection. That could take days.”

Vickers snarled at Nolan. “Two things, Nolan. The first being that you did some work for Amroc. I think Amroc’s implicated in these murders. You did work for them, so I’m going to make sure that we get you for complicity—accessory to murder. That’s a life sentence. I hope you know someone who’ll smuggle you in a lifetime supply of Vaseline, because you’re going to need it—and a big fat

pillow to bite on. Next thing I'm going to do is make sure all your clients know you're a snivelling bastard of an ex-con. Let's see how your business goes after that, even if you can beat the accessory to murder charge. When I've finished with you, you'll count yourself lucky to get a job cleaning out the prison toilets." He paused to catch his breath, shaking his head. "You're just like all those other wannabe computer pricks out there. Always in it for themselves. No sense of social responsibility. You're not even up to the task. Come on Julia. This guy's pathetic. Let's go and find someone who knows what he's talking about. We've got a murderer to catch, and this half-baked, inadequate nerd couldn't connect a monitor up to a PC."

Julia was shocked at Vickers' violent rage against Nolan. Nolan was looking at her as if to ask for help, but Julia just shook her head. Vickers' performance was a psychological masterpiece. Anyone on the receiving end would have been putty in his hands. She could see why he enjoyed amateur theatre so much. "Sorry, Joey, I can't help you now. You've made up your mind, and so, it seems, has the superintendent. We'd better get going now and leave you to get your affairs in order. We'll give you forty-eight hours. Will that be agreeable, Superintendent?"

"Forty-eight hours? He'll do a runner and be out the country by tonight. No way. Fuck him. I'm going to get on his case right away. You're toast, Joey. Pack your toothbrush. You'll be spending the night in the watchhouse tonight. Come on, Julia."

"Now, just a minute, Superintendent. I didn't say I couldn't do it—I said it'd be hard. There's a big difference. As for a computer prick, I've got two PhDs in computer science and a first-class Honours degree from Trinity College. There wouldn't be anyone else in New South Wales as qualified as me."

"All fucking talk, mate. We come here asking for your help to save lives. Julia has put her whole career on the line and so have I. She said you weren't in it for the money, but looking around at this house, I can see that she was well off track. You're just some geek trying to get

more and more cash. You've lost it, mate. You're no good to yourself, and you're no good to anyone else."

Vickers' seething attack on Joey had struck to the heart. The truth was that Joey had been entranced by the trappings of wealth, but deep down, he was a true, 24-carat nerd—the sort of nerd that got off on being top dog. Just like the swimmer or tennis player who would almost cripple themselves with training to be that tiny fraction better than their competitors, Nolan harboured an in-built need to prove to himself—and everyone else—that he was the best of the best.

"Dr Delaney. Can you just tell me about these murders? Give me all the details. Maybe there is a way I can help. Is that okay with you, Superintendent?"

"You better not be wasting my fucking time, boy. Go ahead, Julia. Tell this knob-end what we know."

Nolan swallowed hard. His mouth was bone dry. All he could think about was Vickers' comments about Vaseline and pillows. "You'd better come this way." Nolan led them across the living room, past its central copper fireplace to a room that overlooked an illuminated ornamental pond. The room held four computer monitors and shelves full of equipment, with blue, red, green, and white LEDs flashing irregularly.

For the next half hour, Julia explained everything, including the listening device—which Nolan didn't just know all about, but also explained how it worked and how much it cost. He brought up an image of the device on his computer that was identical to the one Vickers had seen at the pawn shop.

By now, Nolan was hooked. Such is the human spirit—completely predictable.

"Is this equipment all legal?" Vickers asked, eyeing the mass of electronica and its attendant maze of wires.

"Sure it is," said Nolan, gaining composure and confidence as he began tapping at a keyboard and concentrating on the screen. "It's what you do with it that can get you into trouble."

“Are you sure no one can watch what we’re doing?” Julia asked.

“Believe me, Dr D, if anyone tries to monitor me, they’re in for a nasty surprise—their computer would get tied up with an exponential cyclic DNS checking protocol. Within seconds, all the RAM they had would be consumed. Even if the CIA and FBI were to pool their resources, they couldn’t find out what we’re doing. Since that prison stretch, I’ve been paranoid about my security. It isn’t just watertight—it’s airtight. When you asked if I could break into the Customs computer, I honestly thought you were trying to set me up.” He paused. “It’s funny. Because of my brush with the law, I developed new technology for blocking hackers. I installed it at Amroc in Dorset Creek. They paid me a fortune. That’s how I was able to leave that godforsaken place and set myself up here.”

Vickers thought for a moment. “And these security measures at Amroc in Dorset Creek—could you get into their computer, or is the system you installed impervious to even you?”

Joey grinned. “It’s my baby, Mr Vickers. I created it. I could get into Amroc’s mainframe any time I wanted to. Of course, I managed to convince them I couldn’t. Their head of called me one day to say they’d lost their passwords, and asked if I could get back into the computer for them. He said they were desperate and that they’d pay me \$100,000 if I could gain access. I’m not stupid, though. I knew they were just trying to see if I had a way of getting back in.” He shrugged. “I said I couldn’t help them and that we’d have to reload the whole system from the master files. He came back to me and offered \$250,000, said the company would collapse and they were depending on me. I said it was impossible—that no one on earth could get back in. Two weeks later, I contacted them, and they said they’d managed to find the master password. What a lying set of shits they are. Anyway, the short answer is, yes. I can access any files on Amroc’s computer.”

“Okay, Joey. Can you get into their computer and see if anyone else has been accessing medical files? Would you be able to do that?”

“I can try. Just reading a file tends to leave it as it is, but I can probably find out when the medical files were accessed. People generally aren’t aware, but whenever the word processor accesses a document, it creates a temporary file. These are eventually trashed, but provided they haven’t been overwritten, I can search for those temp files. The problem is, I won’t necessarily know who looked at the document. Although, I might be able to tie up the document access with server access. It’d at least give an idea which branch browsed the document. Why do you ask? You really think they had something to do with these deaths?”

“Just thinking out loud, Joey. These people that died—three of them worked for Amroc. Not surprising, of course, that people in the area work for Amroc—they employ nearly everyone. Just a gut feeling. If an Amroc employee had been trying to find out who in their organisation had haemophilia recently, that would be interesting, wouldn’t you say?”

“Anything you say, Boss. Here we go...”

For the next few minutes pages flashed by, some in code, some plain-looking pages, and some colourful pages with Amroc graphics. One by one, “Password accepted” popped up. Each subsequent page took longer and longer. Finally, a notification flashed on the screen. “Amroc Corporation Master files. Level one access required.”

“We’re just about in. At this point, Amroc’s security will know that a Level One request has been made. They’ll cross check to ensure it’s coming from a Level One administrator. If it doesn’t pass that test, they power the whole system down, but I have a little surprise for them. Don’t worry, by the way. They won’t know who tried to gain access, and they won’t even be able to tell if the system has been breached.”



CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

In the Amroc Security central control room, the first operator lay aside his Tom Clancy novel and eyed the screen in front of him.

“LEVEL ONE IP REQUEST RECEIVED 4:43 AM. LEVEL ONE ADMINISTRATOR REQUEST FROM AUSTIN, TEXAS.”

The operator knew the protocol: he had to check that the routing of that request was from a pre-designated and authorised administrator. If the checks didn’t match, then the security team was authorised to simply pull the plug on the computer.

He tapped several keys and moments later his screen became a mass of tiny, changing numbers. The operator frowned. “What the fuck?” Then the screen went completely blank. “Son of a bitch!”

The second operator looked around. “What’s up?”

“It’s crashed on me! Look at this!”

Even though the computer had terabytes of RAM, it was rapidly used up by Nolan’s virus-like program that led to exponentially increasing memory requirements. In seconds, there wasn’t enough



memory to even run the operator's workstation.

"What the fuck just happened?"

"Never seen anything like it, Boss. It's as if the computer's haunted. Try to reboot it and call the tech. There was a level one access request. I can't check the routing until it's back online 'cos the computer's fucked. Should I power the mainframe down?"

"Are you crazy? If that's one of the suits in Texas and you turn the mainframe off, he'll crucify you."

"But we can't establish who made the request. What if it's a hacker?"

"That's the point! We can't prove it either way. Our instructions are clear. If we cross check and find the request doesn't match, *then* we shut the system down. Until you have proof it isn't a legitimate connection, you leave the system powered on. Those are our orders. I'm not putting my job on the line. We're following the guidelines. Can't get fired for that."

"Okay, Dr D, we're in. Now tell me where you want to go. We'll only have about fifteen minutes for them to reboot their workstations and do an integrity check. We have to work fast."

"Dig out the medical section. Do a search for h-a-e-m-o-p-h-i-l-i-a and h-e-m-o-p-h-i-l-i-a. Try to find all the Australian employees

with this condition and see, if you can, when the files were last accessed.”

Joey fiddled about with the mouse and trackpad for a few seconds.

“This is interesting. I can’t find out much, but a request for all haemophiliacs was received six weeks ago. A remote print and database download request was made from Amroc headquarters in New York. Some guy named Gus Van Rensburg. He must be one of the directors. Only they have level one access, if they’re abroad.”

“Can you print out this as proof he made that request?” Vickers asked.

“Sure—and it looks like he’s not the only one. There was another request made from their director of security. His name’s Colonel Jerry Hammel. That was the day after. It was forwarded to an IP address that looks like it’s in India—probably a false proxy. The IP address has sequentially repeated numbers. Too much of a coincidence.”

Nolan disconnected from Amroc’s mainframe and then set about getting into the Australian Customs database.

“So, how do you do it, Joey? How can you get past the Customs passwords? Wouldn’t they change them daily?”

Joey grinned. “I reckon they change them many times during the day, but one of these boxes here listens for echoes of first, third, and fifth harmonics, then filters and amplifies them. It’s the sonic remnants of the passwords that legitimate users type in. I connect on the exchange with an ultra-high resistance router, it records these signals, and I just use the passwords that statistically come up most often. Occasionally it gets it wrong, but I can type in different passwords up to five times before I get locked out.” He grinned again, looking up at Vickers and Julia. “The prosecutor didn’t buy my story that I just was lucky. They were going to cut my sentence by a year if I told them how I did it, but I told them to go fuck themselves—Joey Nolan isn’t for sale. Well, generally, not for sale.”

Vickers was beginning to develop a bit of respect for this Nolan. He had ethics—not entirely good ethics, but he knew who he was and stuck by his own code.

“Nolan, can’t you just hack into the airlines with your box of tricks?”

“No way, Mr Vickers. They nearly all have Echo Defeat.”

“So why doesn’t Customs have Echo Defeat?”

“They will, one day. Government department—slow to do anything. Anyway, it’s only new, and it’s very, very expensive. Invented by a guy in America called Altman—he was just a high school kid when he did it. Very rich now, though. In theory, Echo Defeat is simple, but it has to be fool-proof for people like the Pentagon and international airlines to use it. Whatever the Altman kid came up with, it works.”

Vickers nodded, staring at Nolan’s computer screen, which was a mass of numeric columns. The symbols were constantly moving and changing, like a living colony of mathematical symbols.

“Did all the passengers you’re interested in fly Qantas?” Nolan asked.

“No,” Vickers replied. “One Qantas flight, one JAL, one United.”

“Then the C and I computer is the one you’ll be needing anyway,” said Nolan. “The Qantas computer can only give us Qantas passenger lists, unless we’re talking about a shared-code flight. And I don’t think Qantas shares flights with either United or JAL.” As he spoke, the colony of numbers on his screen gave way to a window in requesting a password. Nolan pressed Enter, and his little black box automatically fed in the password gleaned via Echo Repeat. “ACCESS AUTHORISED,” read the window. A Customs and Immigration menu then took over the screen.

“There you go, we’re in,” said Nolan nonchalantly, leaning back with his hands behind his head.

Julia patted him on the back. “Brilliant, Joey.”

“Okay, where can I take you now, Dr D?”

In reply, Vickers laid a piece of Centralian Motel note paper in front of Nolan. On it were scribbled “June 5th” and three flight numbers.

It took Nolan just several minutes to bring up the Immigration Department’s arrivals records for the morning of Friday June 5th. “You want the names of *all* the passengers on these three flights?” he queried.

“Yep. Somehow, we’ve got to get down to one name.”

“Is that all?” Nolan snorted. He typed in the three flight numbers then extracted the names of seven hundred and forty-two passengers in a matter of minutes. “There you are—I’ve dragged out all the names. What now?”

“A process of elimination, Joey my friend,” said Julia.

It was a daunting task, to isolate one name from seven hundred and forty-two. But they did have some clues to work with. They knew with some certainty the person they were looking for was male: A man had called Mike Nicholls to entice him out to the mine; Zeke Tandy felt certain the person who fired the dart was male; and Constable Steve Duggan had seen a man behind the wheel of the VW Transporter on the Naranyup Highway. Vickers told Nolan to start by eliminating all women from the list. Seconds later, the list had been reduced to three hundred and ninety-four.

Since the person they were looking for was an adult, Vickers asked Nolan to eliminate all persons aged seventeen and under. Nolan took out all the children, and three hundred and twelve names remained.

Now Vickers suggested eliminating all Asians—both Tandy and Constable Duggan thought the person they had seen was Caucasian, and the male who had called Nicholls had sounded European, although, admittedly, the accent could have been faked.

Julia agreed, and Nolan took out all Asian names. This eliminated all the names on the JAL flight, which had been packed with inbound Japanese tourists. It also removed a number of Asian passengers who

had joined the Qantas flight out of London at Singapore. The list was culled to one hundred and forty-one names.

Vickers scanned the remaining names.

"Any idea how old this guy you're looking for is?" Nolan asked.

"Other than the fact that he's an adult, not really," Vickers conceded.

"Would he be over sixty?"

"Unlikely."

"Over fifty?"

"Not sure." Vickers looked to Julia.

"Probably not over fifty," she said. "He'd be fit—in his twenties, thirties, or forties."

"Let's take out the fifty-plus age group," suggested Nolan. "I can always put them back later if we hit a brick wall. Okay?"

Vickers remembered neither that Tandy nor Duggan thought the man they saw was particularly old. "Okay, do it, Nolan."

The list was reduced to eighty-three names.

Vickers couldn't imagine an Australian resident arriving back in the country after an overseas trip and commencing a series of murders a couple of days later—by eliminating Australian passport holders and those with official Australian residency status, the list was reduced to forty-one names: forty-one Caucasian men, aged between eighteen and fifty, all residents outside Australia, all with foreign passports.

Nolan looked around at Vickers. "Is that as far as we can go?" he asked.

Vickers thought for a moment, screwing up his face as he did. "No, sift out all the men aged under twenty-five."

"Under twenty-five? What's to say our man isn't under twenty-five, Frank?"

"Duggan's estimate, for one thing. And think about it. Medical training? Maybe a military background? He'd have to be a least thirty."

"He could be fresh out of med school, or the army."

“Nah, he’s no wet-behind-the-ears kid. To do what he does, to kill the way he does, and then cover his tracks so carefully, this guy’s been around the block.”

She shrugged. “Okay, go ahead, Joey.”

The list was reduced to thirty-three names.

“Any more?” Nolan asked, looking at the names filling his screen. Vickers rubbed his chin, deliberating on the next step. “Thirty-three left. So near, yet so far,” Nolan lamented.

“We’re not finished yet,” said Vickers. “Okay, Joey, give us just the Dutch, English, South African, Rhodesian, Canadian, and USA passport holders.”

“A South African Albinoni lover. You think?”

Now Julia pictured the Albinoni music playing at the Rivers’ house in her mind’s eye, and saw the conductor’s name once more. “Ludo Gaverts!” she said. “The conductor of the Albinoni piece.”

“What about him?”

“He’s a leading international conductor. He’s also South African.”

Vickers smiled. “Our guy’s a patriotic South African Albinoni lover?”

“Could be, Frank. But that doesn’t mean he’d necessarily travel on a South African passport. Does it?”

“This guy would have been travelling on a false passport, you know, under any name,” Nolan said as he typed. “Argentinean, or something like that. Egyptian, or Eskimo, if it comes to that.”

Vickers looked at Julia. “I know. And if he did, we’re screwed.”

Nolan removed all but the US, Canadian, Dutch, German and South African passport holders. Eight men remained, all within the age bracket Vickers had specified.

“Eight names,” said Julia, studying them on the monitor. “All from the Qantas flight.”

“A flight that began in London,” Vickers reminded her. “Our guy could have come down from Scotland, once he’d finished his business there, to fly out of London.”

Julia nodded. She peered at the screen. “Which of you bastards is our man?” she murmured.

“Can’t we eliminate anyone else?” Nolan asked. Though still very much fearful of Vickers and his threats, he’d become ensnared by the excitement of the chase.

“I think that’s about as far as we can go, Nolan.” Vickers sighed.

“What we need now are the passenger lists for the flights from Sydney to Alice Springs on June 5th and 6th,” said Julia. “Our mystery man must have flown there—he couldn’t have done the overland trip in the time available. If he was the guy driving the VW van, we know from the police it was bought in Alice Springs on the 6th. To reach Alice Springs from Sydney by highway or rail would involve a marathon journey through three states, the equivalent of driving across the US from coast to coast, Frank.”

“Can’t help you there, Doc,” said Nolan with a shrug. “Domestic airline passenger details won’t be on this computer. Will I get out of here now?”

Reluctantly, Vickers nodded.

“Thanks, Joey,” Julia sighed. “I think we’re at the end of this particular road.”

Switching on his printer, Nolan printed out the eight names, together with the brief details accompanying each one—nationality, age, reason for entering Australia. Then he backtracked his way out of the government computer. “A pity you couldn’t just phone the airlines with this list and ask them to confirm if any of these people flew to Alice Springs on those two days,” he said as the printer spat out the short list.

“You know, there is a way,” said Julia, a twinkle in her eye. “I could phone the airlines’ medical officers and play doctors with them.”

“You think they’d help you?” Vickers queried.

“Frank, doctors are members of a special fraternity. We speak a different language from you mere mortals.” She smiled as she said it, but she meant it. “I’d have to be a little creative, but I might be able

to wheedle the information out of them. Only trouble is, we'll have to wait until business hours in Sydney before I could call.

"You realise our guy may not have flown on a regular airline?"

"I know—he could have used a charter aircraft," said Julia. "I'll just have to call every domestic airline and charter service in the book. Got any better ideas?"

"No, I guess not," he admitted.

"I'll start with Qantas. Our guy could have booked a ticket all the way through from London to Alice Springs with Qantas." She checked her watch. "Meanwhile, three hours to wait."

"There is something else we could be doing in the meantime, now we have Joey the genius here on our team." Vickers looked at Julia. "We could access Amroc's offshore files and try to dig up information on other haemophiliac Amroc employees who have died abroad."

She smiled. "We're on the same page, Vic. Australia isn't the only place that's been targeted. I feel it in my bones."



CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Vickers dug out the Qantas medical department number. When Julia's call was answered, she asked to be put through to Qantas' chief medical officer, saying it was a life-threatening emergency. Shortly after, she was connected with a Dr Robert Short.

"Dr Short, this is Dr Carol Dorf, with the World Health Organization, in Geneva," said Julia. She had gone to medical school with a Carol Dorf; the last Julia had heard, she was with the WHO. "Good afternoon. I guess it is afternoon there in Australia?"

"Oh, yes, Dr Dorf." There was a note of mild alarm in his voice. International airlines do not frequently receive calls from the WHO. Julia imagined he was having a vision of a deadly epidemic breaking out on a Qantas flight. "What can I do for you?"

"Doctor, this call is, of course, in the strictest confidence," said Julia.

"Of course."

"We need to urgently confirm the identity of an international airline passenger who recently entered Australia and who travelled on to Alice Springs."

"Oh? Is it something serious?"

"Mycobacterium leprae, I'm afraid," she said, with a wink in Vickers' direction.

"What's that?" Vickers mouthed.

"Leprosy?" asked Dr Short, concern apparent in his voice.

"Yes, leprosy," Julia repeated, for Vickers' benefit. "The carrier has been sexually active recently, and

it's possible she's infected a number of male contacts. We have eight names of possibly infected men, but very little else to go on."

"That sounds like a bit of a nightmare task," Dr Short remarked.

"That, Dr Short, is an understatement," Julia responded. "But we do have several clues, and that's why I'm calling you."

"Yes, of course. How can I help?"

"One of the men we're trying to track down was on his way to a conference in Australia, in Alice Springs. But we don't know which of the eight it was."

"So, what you're looking at is a process of elimination?"

"Exactly. Whoever he is, he would have travelled from Sydney to Alice Springs on either June 5th or 6th. The question is, which of the eight is he? And, did he fly with your airline?"

"So, you want me to check our records to see if one of those eight males flew from Sydney to Alice Springs with Qantas on either of those dates?"

"Correct."

"Well, normally, we would ask for a request like this in writing."



“And, naturally, we’ll follow this up in writing. But you understand why we need to move fast—why I need that information yesterday.”

“Of course. Please, give me the names.”

Julia read out the eight names on the list that Joey Nolan had provided.

“It’ll take a few minutes to check these names with our flight records. Do you mind waiting, or is there a number where I can reach you?”

“I’ll wait, if you don’t mind, Doctor.”

“Of course. I’ll be as quick as I can. I’ll just put you on hold in the meantime.”

“That’s fine. Thanks.” The phone clicked, then recorded music came down the line.

“Be prepared for the worst, Julia. He could be checking your story out on another line.”

“I know,” Julia agreed. “Keep your fingers crossed that he’s bought the story.”

The minutes ticked by. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Dr Short came back on the line. “Terribly sorry to keep you waiting, Dr Dorf. There was a small problem with the records.”

“Really? Do you have the information I need?”

“Oh, yes. I wouldn’t take no for an answer from our records people on such a vital matter.” Short seemed intent on impressing Julia how important he was in his aeromedical world.

Julia smiled. “Good for you, Dr Short. So, any luck?”

“I don’t know whether you would consider it lucky or not, Dr Dorf. But, yes, as it happens, one of your eight men did fly with us to Alice Springs on June 6th.”

Julia tensed. “Okay, and that was...?”

“We had Mr Dirk Van Der Hul on QF505 on the morning of June 6th. The flight departed Sydney at 8:50 am Australian Eastern Standard Time, and arrived in Darwin at 11:40 am Central Time.”

“Dirk Van Der Hul. Wonderful,” Julia continued with delight. “That’s one down. Thank you, Dr Short. Your help has been invaluable.”

“Only too pleased to be of assistance, Dr Dorf. You will send us that request in writing, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

“You have my address?”

“It’s right here on file. I’ll send you a fax, if that’s okay by you.”

“Yes, that’d be ideal.”

“Thank you again, Dr Short.”

“Good luck with your hunt for the contacts.”

“Thanks. Bye.” She hung up, then turned to Vickers, “Some of us just have the knack,” she said, handing him the slip of paper on which she had written the information.

He read her scrawled note. “So, our man’s Dirk Van Der Hul.” Vickers referred to the computer printout. “Dirk Van Der Hul. Nationality: Dutch. Age: 36. Boarded QF10 in London, code change to QF6 out of Singapore, landing in Sydney at 6:25 pm on June 5. Reason for visiting Australia: pleasure.”

Back at the hotel, Vickers went into one of his deep, thoughtful zone-outs. He could trust hardly anyone in the higher echelons of the NT police. Maybe one of his contacts in the Queensland or New South Wales police could help, but what the corruption went all the way to the top? They’d tell him they were taking him to a safe house, the place would be somewhere deserted, then *whack*. The end of Superintendent Frank Vickers. He contemplated contacting Interpol—at least they could be assured of not being implicated. The trouble was he didn’t have any contacts with this organisation. They’d listen to him, phone the police commissioner, and probably be told Vickers had lost his marbles.

Then, a thought: the American FBI expert on serial killers who was lecturing senior cops at the Darlinghurst convention centre. If

only Vickers could have ten minutes with him. He'd surely be able to convince him, and hopefully get some help.

"Penny for your thoughts, Vic." Julia suddenly snapped Vickers out of his dreaming.

"Sorry, Jules. I'm just thinking about that FBI serial killer expert—you know, the one who spoke after me on the TV. Kaylien."

"I remember. What were you hoping he could do?"

"There's no way this killer could do what he's done without international help. This is a big-ticket exercise. We're talking millions, and that sort of expenditure always leaves a paper trail. If I can get some intelligence on organisations that could fund this kind of operation, it'll be a good start."

"He won't see you, Frank. Besides, how are you going to even get near him? There'll be security personnel hovering over him like flies around honey."

"Jules, set a thief to catch a thief, set a cop to catch a cop. The first thing we need to do is find out the name of someone he works with. I'll Google him and see where he works. Then, using your charms, you can call his office and find out the names of some of his trusted co-workers. The next thing we'll need is a few photos of the security staff. A quick trip down to a print shop. It'll all fall in place."

Julia just smiled.



CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

The first thing next morning, they went to the conference centre and, posing at tourists, took multiple pictures of the security staff. Vickers ended up with many examples of the security badges they were wearing. It was a simple and quick Photoshop job to make two reasonable copies. Laminating the fake cards and threading a lanyard through hand-cut slits in the plastic created a passable identity card. It wouldn't bear close scrutiny, but then again, security cards hardly ever get closely examined. A quick visit to a local pawn shop resulted in a pair of old hearing aids. He attached some coiled up wire to the earpieces and it appeared as if they both had FBI-style communication devices. Dark suits, white shirts, black ties, and mirrored sunglasses finished off their characters.

“...And so, ladies and gentlemen, with modern technology, psychological profiling, international databases and DNA science, life is now very hard for a serial killer. We always get them, and faster

than ever before. The serial killer is becoming an endangered species. Thank you for your attention. You have been a wonderful audience.”

The audience was composed of senior police officers from Australia and New Zealand. They had hung on his every word; during his ninety-minute lecture, you could have heard a pin drop. As Kaylien finished his talk, the crowd of over a thousand people delivered a standing ovation.

Deputy Director Robert Kaylien of the FBI looked genuinely touched. The applause went on for two or three minutes. He held up his hands. “It’s been an honour. I wish I could stay longer, but I’m due to leave for Hong Kong in a few hours. No rest for the wicked, as they say.” Kaylien gave an embarrassed smile. He walked off the stage to continued applause. As he was about to leave the main part of the auditorium, a tall, well-dressed, blonde woman approached him and his entourage. Kaylien’s minders were too busy looking at the woman to bother checking her security credentials.



“Professor Kaylien?”

Kaylien smiled “Yes, that’s me, miss.”

“Professor Kaylien, I have a gentleman on the phone called Mr Thomas Bingle. He’s calling from Caracas in Venezuela. He says it’s urgent and private. You could take the call in the office over there, if you wish.”

“What the hell does Tom want? He’s supposed to be on holiday. He’s probably fallen foul of one of their morality laws. Okay, let’s have a word with the old reprobate. Lead the way.”

One of the security guards cut in. “I’d better come along with you sir. My orders are to not let you out of my sight.”

“Relax, relax, Sam. It’s just a personal phone call. And I won’t be long. You can wait outside the door, if you like.”

Vickers had specifically selected Tom Bingle because he actually was in Venezuela. That way, there was little possibility of Kaylien becoming suspicious.

Kaylien entered the room with Julia and walked towards the phone on the conference table, unaware Vickers was behind the door. Vickers closed the door. Kaylien spun round as Vickers said, “Good morning, Professor Kaylien.”

“Who are you?”

“Detective Superintendent Frank Vickers. I need to have a quick word with you.”

Vickers could see Kaylien’s eyes dart around the room, looking for an exit. “I mean you no harm, Professor Kaylien, but there’s a very urgent matter that can’t wait.”

“Mr Vickers, I don’t like being shanghaied into meetings. It’ll have to wait. Now, if you’ll just stand out of my way.”

Vickers opened his jacket, showing the butt of his .44 Magnum. Kaylien froze.

“Like I said, I need a word with you. You will speak to me, you will sit down, you will shut up and listen. If you give me ten minutes of your time, you’ll be free to leave. Either way, you’re here for ten minutes. With a broken nose or without is your choice.”

Kaylien’s palms were starting to sweat. He felt a tremor of frisson but was simultaneously intrigued, as well as alarmed. “Okay, Mr Vickers, ten minutes. I have your word?”

Vickers nodded. “I’m no liar. I said ten minutes, I meant ten minutes. After that, you’re free to do what you like. Mr Kaylien, this is Dr Julia Delaney. She is a pathologist from the United States and has been working as a family physician in an outback Australian town called Dorset Creek. A murder occurred there not long ago. Subsequently, we found two other victims, at least, who also bore the hallmarks and MO of the original killing.” Vickers paused, allowing this to sink

in. “We have informally accessed medical databases. There appears to be an increased deathrate of haemophiliacs in Alaska, Scotland and Nigeria—all oil-producing areas. And the suspicious deaths in Australia have one common factor—they were all haemophiliacs and Amroc employees or ex-employees. There’s a serial killer on the loose in Australia, Mr Kaylien. A serial killer who is well-financed, has access to high-quality forged documents, and whose alias is Dirk Van Der Hul. He’s probably from Holland or South Africa. My superior, Deputy Commissioner Willem Forster, is suppressing any further investigation in the face of irrefutable evidence that supports my concerns. He is, in my opinion, compromised. I don’t know if his superiors are also involved, which is why I’m speaking to you and not to them.”

“You’re talking about those vampire murders? The ones I was asked about on the TV last night? You don’t think that you might be letting your imagination run riot, Superintendent?”

“Whether I suffer from an over-fertile imagination or not is irrelevant, Professor Kaylien. Facts are facts.”

Kaylien offered a smile. “Please call me Rob. All my friends do.”

Vickers narrowed his eyes—he knew this technique. “And you can call me Frank, but only because it’s quicker. Professor Kaylien, I’ve studied criminology at a postgraduate level. Please don’t underestimate me.”

“Okay Frank. Sorry. Professional force of habit. Go on. No more manipulation.”

Vickers dove straight into the facts. After about six minutes, he passed over to Julia, who succinctly explained her medical findings. Their ten minutes were up.

Vickers stood. “Okay, Rob, a deal’s a deal. You can walk out the door, if you like. You can even tell your nannies that I kidnapped you, if that’s what you wish.”

“Can I use my cellphone, Frank?”

“The ten minutes are up, Rob. You can do whatever you like.”

Kaylien took out his mobile and pressed in a number. “Roz, it’s Rob. Can you cancel the flight to Hong Kong? Something urgent’s come up. I’m not sure when I’ll be able to make the flight. Just await my call. Make the necessary apologies.” He chatted for a short while longer then turned to Vickers. “Either you’re the most convincing pair of psychopaths I’ve ever met, or this is high-level corruption. I’ve polished a chair at FBI headquarters and given far too many lectures for too many years. I miss the old days of chasing criminals. You’ve got me, Frank. I might live to regret it, but I’m in. What do you want me to do?”

“Forster’s either been offered money, or he’s got some dirt in his past and he’s being forced to block the investigation. Can you look into him? I need a psychological profile on Forster and, if possible, Dirk Van Der Hul—and I need it all yesterday. And can you confirm that there have been other haemophiliac deaths in other parts of the world? The information I have—well, I obtained it by very irregular means.” Vickers paused. “It’d help if you could give me some psychological pointers how to rattle Forster, too.”

“I’ll get straight on to that little list of yours. It might take a while—it’s about three am on the East Coast of the US. I’m owed a few favours, though, so I’ll do my best to get those details for you within a day. In the meantime, let’s go somewhere more comfortable and have some lunch. I want you to start again at the beginning and give me the long version—don’t spare the slightest detail.”

While enjoying considerable quantities of wine and good food at the conference centre’s restaurant, Vickers, Delaney and Kaylien talked about the case in minute detail.

“This Forster guy. You say he’s got a mistress, a wife and kids, and he’s a hard drinker?”

Vickers nodded. “Yeah, that’s Willem, all right. A good-time guy. Very tough, though—physically and mentally.”

“Does he often make abrupt commands to his secretary and officers?”



"He does, actually. Sometimes he's quite rude to people who can't bite back. Told me that's to keep them on their toes."

"What sort of clothes does he wear?"

"Generally quite well dressed, often with a fancy tie. He wears fancy shoes, too."

"And what sort of relationship does he have with his wife?"

"Well, he wears the pants.

His wife is the quiet type, and his kids are well behaved."

"I'd say he's compensating for a feeling of inadequacy, Frank. Some people run when frightened. Some stay and battle it out. He'll run—I'd stake my life on it. If you can find the magic words, he'll flee, and that'd be tantamount to an admission of guilt. If that happened and any of his superiors are involved, they'll flee, too—or try to cut a deal."

Vickers thought for a second. "So it all boils down to whether we can dig up any dirt on him."

"That's right." Kaylien took a sip of his wine. "You and Julia have done a first-class job. That Van Der Hul thing was inspired. And you've handled Forster well—anyone else would have backed off. I imagine that's what Forster was banking on—he's used to cowering people into submission. Those friendly nights you had with him were probably his attempt to groom you and keep you pliable. I reckon if we can put the screws on him, he'll cut the best deal he can and implicate anyone and everyone to save his own skin. Whoever is pulling his strings probably thinks he's one of those tough guys who'll do a 25-year stretch rather than inform on his associates. Trust me—he won't be." He paused again, offering Vickers a grin. "And I have

some very good ideas on how to rattle his cage. Nonetheless, you're playing for big stakes here. He's got clout and could still do you and Julia a lot of harm. Sure you want to ride this train?"

"Rest assured, Rob, I'm going to get that bastard of a murderer and Forster, even if it kills me. That's just what I do. I catch criminals, whether it's good for my health or not."

Kaylien felt a little pang of embarrassment. He'd allowed himself to enter the lecture circuit and ride the bureaucratic gravy train for years. He used to be aggressively zealous at his job, just like Vickers, but had started to think more about his pension and promotion prospects rather than a job well done. Well, no more. He was going to throw himself into this intriguing case with all his old obsessiveness.

"As a matter of interest, Frank, that gun of yours, it's a Smith & Wesson model 29. Why do you need such a cannon?" He smirked. "Are you compensating for something? And how did you get it past aircraft security?"

"Fair question. Airport security is never a problem. I declare it and show my Police ID. It goes in the luggage hold. The bag is handed to me by the airport police outside the airport." He paused. "Why don't I have a 9mm or .40 cal Glock, like everyone else? I had to call in a lot of favours to use a .44. I lied and said I had arthritis in my hand and couldn't handle an automatic. They gave me permission to use a revolver, provided I bought the gun myself. No calibre was specified, so I bought a .44. Revolvers are more reliable than automatics. They only have six shots, not like a Glock's fifteen. When there's a fifteen-round magazine, people tend to be unselective and spray bullets all over the place. With six shots, every bullet is precious. You're a bit more discriminating—it's a bit like using a good film camera rather than a cheap digital. Why a .44 Magnum? I've shot people who are high on crack. A 9mm didn't seem to bother them—until they bled out, that is. In the meantime, they're dangerous. If you hit someone anywhere on their body with a .44, they go down and stay down. I

would only ever use a gun when there's no alternative, but when I do, I want a gun that's effective, not environmentally friendly."

Kaylien mused on Vickers' rational response. No hint of my-gun's-bigger-than-your-gun syndrome, and he knew from all his time in the FBI that the type of handgun issued was more about political correctness than efficacy. "Well, Frank and Julia, it's been surreal, that's for sure. I was a hostage negotiator for a long time and thought I could handle most situations, but I have to say, you really got under my skin." He paused for a moment. "They lost the mould after they made you Frank. Probably a good thing."

Vickers couldn't help but chuckle—Kaylien was probably right.

"I'll get started on your list pronto. It'll be late in Washington. With a bit off luck, I should be able to have most of the information by one pm tomorrow. Shall we meet again then?"

Vickers looked to Julia. "Fine by you, Jules?"

"Sure. Twenty-four hours isn't that long—we can fill in the time with plenty of other stuff." Vickers made a mental note—Julia was being much quieter than usual.

Kaylien didn't notice, though. "See you both tomorrow, then—shall we say outside the Railton Hotel at Darling Harbour?"

They shook hands and Kaylien left the dining room.

When he was gone, Vickers turned to Julia. "What's up? You look angry."

"I don't know if I trust him. He's a psychologist. How do we know that this whole thing wasn't just him trying to make you think he bought your story? We'll probably meet up with him tomorrow and find he's got the New South Wales Serious Crime Squad to arrest us for unlawful detention."

"I saw excitement in his eyes, Jules. He looked like an old married man who's got himself a new girlfriend. He's going to do what he says. I guarantee it. You'll see."

"Still, I think we should get to the meeting place an hour earlier and check he doesn't have a welcoming committee for us."

Vickers smiled. “And I thought I was the paranoid one. You’re right, though. What say we make it two hours earlier?” Julia beamed at him, and Frank couldn’t help but beam back. “We’re in Sydney, Jules. This is supposedly the most exciting place in Australia. Why don’t we paint the town red? Do some shopping, catch a show. I’m weary of murder and mayhem. Let’s have some good, old-fashioned fun. What do you say?”

“I say there’s no one else in the whole world I’d prefer to be in the company of.”



CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

Next morning the slightly hungover pair were nursing mild headaches and the guilt that follows a night of gross excess. It was nearly nine am when Vickers turned on the coffee machine and meandered to the balcony. The Sydney skyline looked beautiful, and the air was chilly.

“Vic. Do you have as much of a headache as me?”

Julia had just woken up, and her hair was tussled in the most alluring way. The true test of natural beauty—how does one look after a night on the tiles, with no makeup? In Julia’s case, the answer was very, very good.

Vickers smiled at her. “Coffee will just be a few minutes. Breakfast will be here in a minute. And, yes, I have a splitting headache. Nothing that caffeine and codeine won’t fix, though.”

“A codeine addict, eh? You never mentioned that!”

“We all have our vices, Doctor. I’m going to keep searching till I find yours.”

There was a knock at the door, and a voice called out, “Room service!”



Vickers had a cursory look through the door viewer before opening it. The waiter wheeled in a large trolley decorated with flowers and different types of breads. The waiter reached into the base of the trolley and drew out what looked to be a long metal object.

Vickers quickly grabbed the waiter's arm and spun him around, drawing his collar around his throat. A pair of serving tongs dropped out of the waiter's hand, and the waiter let out a cry.

Vickers quickly realised his mistake and let the waiter go, patting him on the back.

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"Frank, what the hell...?" Julia was trying to take in what had just happened.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," Vickers was struggling for the right words. The hapless waiter's mouth and eyes were wide open, and he was visibly shaking.

"I saw those serving tongs and thought you were after us, mate. Is there some way I can make it up to you? I really do apologise."

The waiter was not used to patrons attacking him, but he was even less used to guests apologising to him. He regained his composure somewhat and tried to make light of the situation. "I'm having trouble with my neighbour. He wants me to cut a tree down that's growing over our fence. Would you like to pay him a social call and explain things in your special way? He's a real asshole."

Vickers grinned. "I guess I owe you one, but we're busy with some important business. When this is all over I promise to come around and have a friendly chat with him."

The waiter eased up a little more, straightened his collar and tie, and left, dignity a little bruised, but less injured than he thought he'd be two minutes ago.

Julia crossed her arms. "Frank, we need a talk."

Vickers panicked. "Julia, I saw the tongs and thought it was a gun. I wasn't frightened for myself, but I thought about you getting hurt and just burst into action. I can't help it. I want to protect you; I want to care for you. I can't bear even the thought of someone putting the frighteners on you—" He was interrupted by Julia running to him and throwing her arms around him.

"Oh, you loveable, wonderful, impulsive slob. What did I do to deserve you? I didn't even think I liked Aussies. Now I find myself in love with one..."

For the second time in five minutes, Vickers was speechless. He had this way towards Julia for some time now, but had tried to keep his emotions buried. He was nearly ten years older than Julia, and he couldn't believe that someone like Julia could ever want him. Letting a smile part his lips, he squeezed her tightly and stared into the sparkly blue eyes of this beautiful creature.

"If I died this very moment, I would die happier than I've ever been in my life. What do you see in me? How am I even your type?"

"And what would my type be?" Julia was wearing an impish grin.

"Well, I can imagine someone younger, for starters. Someone in a fine suit..."

"You wear fine suits!"

"Okay, I suppose I do, but I meant someone in a fine suit who looks like he belongs in a fine suit—someone getting out of a Ferrari and walking up the steps to his mansion, someone with all the right connections. I'm just a country copper."

"Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt. Most of those dandies you're talking about would run a mile at the first sign of trouble. You'd step out in front of a bus to save me. You care about people—you care about me. You have standards and ethics. You're dogged and

determined. You don't bow down to superiors, but you're not like Dirty Harry. In short, you're the perfect gentleman."

"Gosh, Jules. You're making me sound like a Golden Retriever. I'm a beer-swilling, loud-mouthed, ill-bred thug. You can do better than me, surely."

"I don't think I can."

Vickers smiled again. "So you forgive me for ruining breakfast?"

"You haven't ruined it—it's still there, and I'm still ravenous. Come on, Vic. Serve it up. I can't promise that I won't grab you by your throat, though."

And so they enjoyed a hearty breakfast. There was no talk about the murders—just music, literature, outback rodeos, and movies they'd seen.

A little while later, Vickers looked down at his watch. "Christ, Jules—look at the time. We were supposed to be at the Railton an hour ago. We've got to rush."

Julia gave him a lazy smile. "Let's not rush, Vic. Who cares if Kaylien's set us up? Let him. I don't care any more. We'll get there at twelve, as we agreed. If he's got stooges there, so be it. Somehow, right now, there are other things that seem just as important as this case."

She brushed her hand across Vickers' neck and nuzzled her face up to his cheek. Vickers drew her closer and they kissed for what seemed like an eternity.

They did get there a little earlier than twelve, and surveyed the area to see if a reception party was going to be waiting for them. Rooftops, half-curtained windows, women with strollers who looked incongruous—they were all scrutinised. Julia pointed to a few street sweepers, but Vickers pointed out their hands and nails were grubby, making it unlikely they were police.

“We’ll just take a chance, Jules. If Kaylien’s shit on us, so be it. It’s been nice knowing you – just wanted you to know that, in case I get dragged off...”

“Only nice? That’s not very romantic. I was going to say ‘existentially sublime’.”

“You always did have a way with words. But what else can I expect from the medical profession? Come on. It’s almost twelve—witching hour.”



As they approached the entrance of the Railton Hotel, two burly Asians started to run towards Vickers. He automatically got himself into the right position and started to pull his fist back—at least he’d give them a headache for their pains. Julia jumped in front of Vickers.

“Step down, Superintendent!”

The Asians carried on running right on past them. They called out to two women who were behind

Vickers. When they got to the women, they hugged them and swung them around.

“We’re going to have to get you some anger management courses, Vic. I just saved you from a night in the cells.”

For the second time in a few hours, Vickers was embarrassed. He didn’t say a word, just nodded gruffly and carried on walking to the hotel. Robert Kaylien approached, face plastered with a smile.

“Frank. I was going to call you, but I didn’t know whether the line was secure. As the saying goes, have I got news for you.”

Vickers relaxed. His nerves had got the better of him up until now.

Kaylien continued, “You’re going to be very pleased with what I’ve got for you. Let’s go to that café. I’ll have an Americano and a croissant. Double shot, please.”

“Can’t you tell me what you’ve got first?” asked a plaintiff Vickers, looking genuinely like a kid who’s been told he’ll have to wait for his birthday to get his present.

“Not until I’ve had my coffee. God, it’s lovely to watch you squirm. Let me assure you, it’s going to be worth the wait.” He grinned. “Call this payback for yesterday morning.”

And so they had to go through the ritual of phatic conversations and other small talk, two coffees and croissants, before Kaylien, with a huge smile, started on his monologue.

“Willem Hendricks Forster. Born 1949. Attended Natal University, 1967, qualifying in Law and Criminology with Honours in 1971. Fourth child of Charles and Katherine—nee Kruger—Forster. Apparently there isn’t even a speeding fine to his name. He was universally liked by all, even the blacks at the time of apartheid. He was known to be firm but scrupulously fair. Incorruptible. Treated everyone, black or white, with respect and tolerance. His wife and two children were killed by a terrorist bomb meant for another police officer.

“Even after the death of his family, Forster still dealt fairly with the black community and even stated at a meeting that his personal tragedy was a symptom of the desperately unfair system. He was a committed Christian. Not a proselytising bible-basher, but one of those Christians who actually practise what they preach. It was a wonder he rose to the rank of colonel in the police force, although it was probably because his arrest record was second to none, and everyone knew exactly where they stood with him.”

Julia and Vickers looked crestfallen. That kind of person wouldn’t cover for murderers.

“Here’s the thing, though. Willem Forster is dead.”

It took a moment for the penny to drop.

“So who the hell is Forster?”

“The man who you know as Willem Forster, isn’t Willem Forster. According to fingerprint files, he’s a guy called Anton Dressler, also an officer in the South African Police, except the exact opposite of



Forster: mean, aggressive, vindictive, corruptible, and, following the fall of apartheid, almost certainly up for a life sentence for a handful of murders. The net was closing in on him. Dressler was assumed, from dental records, to have committed suicide by setting his car on fire. They put it down to the fact he was about to be arrested.

“Immediately after that, though, Willem Forster didn’t turn up to work one day, citing depression. Within days, he leaves the police force and the area. Three months later, he gets a job as a lieutenant with the Louisiana Police Force at Jefferson Precinct. They had his prints on record, so they could eliminate him from enquiries if they found his prints at crime scenes. Since Forster had his prints on record in South Africa, it was easy to tie things up. Seems our friend Anton killed Forster and assumed his identity. It would have been quite easy, since there was no family to take care of—Forster’s parents had died and he was an only child. Very plausible to say you’re depressed and leaving the police if your whole family’s been wiped out.

“Anton then changed his appearance. He had a prominent chin—that’s gone. He also had a prominent forehead—that’s gone, too. His cheekbones have been trimmed back and his mouth has been altered in shape. He doesn’t quite look like the real Willem Forster, but

it's close enough. Luckily, our facial recognition software saw right through the plastic surgery.

"Forster or Dressler, whatever you want to call him, rapidly rose in the ranks. Became captain in eighteen months, then inspector in a year. After a total of five years with the Louisiana Police, he applied for the vacant post as deputy commissioner in the Northern Territory. It would have been a cake walk. He had access to sophisticated equipment and probably put the squeeze on some of the professional forgers he'd have come across. I bet the NT Police thought they'd hit the jackpot when he went for the job. As big of a bastard as he is, he certainly seems an effective cop."

Vickers and Julia remained silent for a while, dumbfounded. Kaylien went on. "Almost like the 'Odessa File', there was an organisation in South Africa that specialised in spiriting away the apartheid era's bad apples. I guess they helped Dressler and called in the debt. Dressler couldn't refuse. Possibly they threatened him with exposure—that's usually how these things work. As soon as he had accepted their assistance to get out of South Africa, they owned him body and soul. God only knows what corruption he would have been involved with in Louisiana. He's obviously got no moral compass and wouldn't have felt any qualms about this mob who are doing the murders." He paused. "Get Forster and we've possibly got everyone. Remember, though, that what I've told you doesn't mean for a fact he covered up for the Dorset Creek killer, but I have a suggestion as to how you can hasten things up to find out for sure."

Vickers was stunned, to say the least. "I'm all ears, Rob. Tell me more."

"I don't suppose either of you can pull off accents?"

Frank grinned. "As it happens, I recently played Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. I have the best Southern drawl in the Northern Territory. Why do you ask?"

"Any chance you could put on a passable South African accent, Frank?"

“Absolutely—I’ve appeared in two Athol Fugard plays.”

“Well, Frank, now I want you to put on the act of a lifetime. This is what you’re going to do...” Kaylien dropped his voice, and for the next ten minutes, explained his plan, a *tour-de-force* of cunning. When he finished speaking, Vickers and Julia were smiling.

“Rob, you’ve gone above and beyond. We have Forster well and truly by the balls. I—and future victims—owe you more than I could ever express. If there’s anything I can ever do for you, well—you know what to do. Now, get yourself off to Hong Kong.”

Kaylien smiled. “I can’t just go back to the States now. Things are heating up. You’re about to crack the biggest case Australia has ever seen, and I want to be part of it. I’m staying.”

Kaylien postponed his entire lecture tour, phoned his wife and family to say he would be held up in Australia for a few days more on bureau business, and had embarked on a course the Director of the FBI in Washington would have frowned upon.

Vickers looked at Julia. They both knew it was pointless trying to keep Kaylien out of proceedings, and besides, Vickers had already thought of another way that Kaylien’s preeminence could be very, very useful.

“Rob, I take it you have your FBI identification with you?”

“Of course—we’re required to carry it at all times. You’re asking because...?”

“Fancy doing a little bit of good old-fashioned street trudging? This Van Der Hul must have stayed at a hotel while he was waiting for the plane the next morning. He won’t have stayed at one of the airport hotels—he’s not that stupid—but it will be somewhere close by. There are probably up to a hundred places he could have stayed. I’d like to find out anything we can about him, and your FBI identification is going to carry a lot of weight in Australia. People probably have more respect for the FBI than they do for the Australian Federal Police. If you can get details of Van Der Hul’s passport photograph from your

people back at Langley, that'd be helpful, but where he stayed is more important."

"Frank, I like your thinking. If we can find where he stayed, and if he used the internet, there may be logs of whom he contacted. I'll make a few phone calls and see what we can dig up. In the meantime, let's go round those hotels."

After sixteen gruelling hours of hard work without any success, they were beginning to fear that trying to find out where Van Der Hul had stayed was a wild goose chase. Finally, at the Pacifica Hotel, going through the usual ritual of introducing themselves as Deputy Director of the FBI, Robert Kaylien, and Detective Superintendent Frank Vickers, the duty manager, a smiling Filipino, came up trumps.

"Yes, there he is. Van Der Hul, Dirk, room 308."

When Kaylien asked if any of the desk staff currently on duty were on duty the night of June 5th, Simonino Lopez returned with a young girl who, it transpired, had an excellent memory. She peered at her boss's computer screen as she read the name. "Mr Van Der Hul?" She repeated the name several times. "Yes, I remember him. A South African man."

"Definitely South African?"

She nodded her head. "Yes. I know a South African accent when I hear it."

"Could you describe Mr Van Der Hul for us?" asked Kaylien.

"I think so, yes," she replied. "He was obnoxious. He complained that he had asked for a room with a wired internet socket, and wasn't given one. We had to find him another room."

"And, what did he look like?"

The girl then proceeded to describe Wolf Kroeger in fairly accurate detail. Just about that time, in a moment of good timing, Kaylien received an email with a photograph of Van Der Hul from

the FBI database. He showed it to the duty manager, who confirmed it was the same man.

“Do you keep logs of internet connections? Can we find out which sites he connected to?”

“It might be possible, but you’d have to get in touch with the internet provider. It’s called Hotel Rapide ISP, and they’re based in Melbourne.”

They thanked the duty manager. It would take forever to get in touch with someone useful at Hotel Rapide ISP, and they’d need a court order, which would probably drag on for days. And besides, their man would almost certainly have used an anonymous proxy server, or a string of them.

From their list of haemophiliacs, it seemed as if Van Der Hul was following a roughly geographic path, starting in the outback, where the concentration of police was much lower, and working his way up to Darwin.

Not wanting to waste any more time, they decided to get straight off to Darwin, then try to follow Van Der Hul’s path. With a bit of luck, they’d track him down to his latest hotel room.



CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

The house sat on a rocky promontory jutting out into the water at Brinkin, a small coastal suburb and one of Darwin's most sought-after addresses. A private, twelve-acre peninsula incorporated a two-acre ornamental lake and the large, rambling, two-storey house of a multi-millionaire, with a six-car garage full of German and Italian marques. A Roman-style swimming pool was set into a central courtyard.

With a high electric fence across the inland perimeter to keep out both the curious and the larcenous, and sheer cliffs ranging down to the sea—cliffs so sheer neither the property owners nor the police thought anyone could negotiate them—they thought they were more than safe. But Kroeger wasn't a normal criminal, and this was the way he came.

The owners of the house were Milan and Alanka Murzak, Czech-born migrants to Australia who had arrived in 1989 with big ideas, high hopes, and little else. Now they owned an internationally successful jewellery business selling cultured pearls farmed in the beautiful waters around Darwin. Alanka designed the jewellery while

Milan marketed them. Milan Murzak had intuitive business sense and he was charming and good-looking. He was also a haemophiliac.

Lying on a knoll beside the lake in the black of the moonless night, using a night vision scope and the replacement STG listening device, Kroeger, clad in his customary black, watched and listened to the house from the darkness for three hours. A police car was parked in the circular drive out the front, driven there by the two uniformed cops on protection duty. One, a male, was downstairs; a female officer was located upstairs. There were five other people in the house: the Murzaks, their ten-year-old daughter, their eight-year-old son, and their 25-year-old nanny.

By 11:30 pm, the family members and the nanny had gone to sleep. All lights were out, other than in the family room downstairs and on the upstairs landing. At midnight, the cop downstairs patrolled the house, checking all external doors and windows were locked. Within seven minutes he had returned to the family room and settled down for the night.

Kroeger put his surveillance equipment into a bag that he hid in the undergrowth. He waited a few more minutes, his eyes scanning the darkness for movement, his ears cocked, listening for warning sounds on the clammy night air like a nocturnal predator of the animal kingdom. Then, picking up his black killing bag, he moved off.

Having circled the house on a reconnaissance earlier, and knowing exactly where everything was, he skirted to the east of the building, crossing a lawn to reach the side of the house. The predator set his bag down under a window to the children's playroom, which was off the family room. It was dim, only being lit with ambient moonshine—perfect for his next move.

Through the window, Kroeger could see the male cop's back. He was sitting on a couch, disobeying his orders by watching television. Kroeger took out a miniature butane blowtorch. The cop was still watching TV; now, his head lolled forward. He was fighting



drowsiness. Kroeger allowed himself a small grin. This was going to be easy.

Kroeger lit the torch then played the flame across the window glass. The remote location of the Murzaks' house may have afforded them privacy, but it was not good for their security. In an average suburban situation of row upon row of quarter-acre blocks, a stickybeak neighbour would almost

certainly have noticed the flame on the glass of the Murzak playroom window.

In less than three minutes, Kroeger had silently melted a hole in the glass, slipped a gloved hand in, grasped the latch, and turned it.

Slowly and quietly, the window slid open. The sounds of *The Late Show with David Letterman* reached his ears. The cop hadn't noticed the torch at work and hadn't heard the window open. He was close to nodding off to sleep.

Kroeger put both hands on the windowsill, then gracefully brought his body up until he was balancing on his knees on the window ledge. Resting his hands like a gymnast using a vaulting horse, he took all his weight on his arms and lowered his feet to the floor with hydraulic efficiency. Still, the cop in the next room didn't even flinch. Luckily for Kroeger, no toys littered the polished wood floor; they were all neatly piled in large plastic boxes.

Step by wary step, Kroeger made his way across the room. On reaching the doorway to the family room, a floorboard groaned beneath his feet. He froze. The cop stirred and opened his eyes. He sat up, stretching his arms, then squirmed a little to make his back more comfortable.

The Murzak house was equipped with a sophisticated burglar alarm system, with movement detectors in every room. While the police were in the house, this had been switched off, although the movement detectors were still active, and every time there was any movement, a detector high in the far corner clicked annoyingly and flashed red for a moment.

The cop frowned as the movement detector in the corner suddenly clicked and glowed red. He couldn't figure it out—he hadn't moved. Why would it go off like that? Within milliseconds, his brain had processed the information.

In that instant, Wolf Kroeger's left arm snaked around the hapless officer's neck. A gloved right hand clamped over the young policeman's nose and mouth, cutting off his oxygen supply. With his left arm under the cop's chin, Kroeger pulled hard, using the back of the couch for leverage.

The cop let out a muffled cry for help, desperately reaching up and trying to pry the hand from his mouth and the arm from his throat. Kroeger's hand was clamped over the cop's mouth and nostrils like an iron trap on a rabbit's leg, and nothing, apart from the intervention of the hunter himself, was going to release that grip. The struggling ceased, but Kroeger didn't let go; he maintained his hold around the victim's neck, keeping his hand over his nose and mouth. Suddenly, the struggling started again. The cop had been lying doggo, pretending to have passed out in the hope that Kroeger would let go but this was anticipated.

But now, with his lungs screaming for air, Dougherty, the young police officer, made one last despairing attempt to free himself. But his strength was gone, and Kroeger had no intention of letting go until his victim was immobilised.

The cop blacked out. His muscles twitched, and then he went limp—for real, this time. Kroeger let the unconscious cop sag onto the couch and taped him up.

There were two stairways to the upper floor. The sweeping formal front stairs had been inspired by those of *Gone with the Wind* fame. Mainly there for show, they were rarely used. The narrow back stairs led up to the bedrooms.

The female police officer, sitting on a hard chair on the landing beside the back stairs, was reading about the latest exploits of European royalty in a copy of *Woman's Day*. She was twenty, of Chinese extraction, 5'5", her shiny black hair pulled back in a tidy bun. Small framed, she had been an athlete at school, a junior sprint champion, and had become a fully-fledged constable with the Northern Territory Police just two and a half months ago. Like most novices, she did everything by the book. She was even dutifully wearing her peaked cap.

Around her, doors led off the landing to the bedrooms of the Murzaks, their two children, and the nanny. As she read, her mind strayed to her boyfriend of three years—they had just split up. He didn't like her being a cop, and wanted her to give it up and find an "ordinary" job. He said a lot of his friends had treated him like a pariah ever since she had graduated from police college.

There was a sound on the stairs below; a muffled voice. She thought it said, "Come down".

She looked up from her magazine, somewhat confused. The only person downstairs was her colleague. "Colin? Is that you?" There was no response. She came to her feet. "Colin?" Still no response.

Instead of post-and-rail bannisters, the stairs were skirted by a solid wooden partition to waist height. When the Murzaks designed their



dream home, they had specified solid bannisters so that their small children could not squeeze through the rails and fall down the stairs. As a result, it was impossible for the officer to see through, and she was forced to go to the bannister and look over.

Suddenly, she saw a face staring into her eyes. Kroegeer was on the stairs, just a few treads from the top. In an instant, his hands reached up and grasped her slender neck in a strangle-hold. Terrified, choking, she tried to wrench his hands from her throat, but the grip only tightened. Then she was pulled hard and dragged over the bannister rail.

In the bedroom closest to the stairs, the nanny stirred, woken by the dull thump of the young officer being dragged over the bannister. She sat up and listened for a moment, but could hear nothing aside from her own heavy breathing.

The nanny had been nervous about staying in the Murzak house while the serial killer was on the loose. Even with police in the house, she felt ill at ease, and it had taken the concerted efforts of the Murzaks—young and old—to convince her to stay. Now she noticed the yellow glow under her door from the landing light disappear. Puzzled, she turned on the bedside lamp and tiptoed barefoot to the door. Again she paused to listen but heard nothing.

The landing was in darkness. In the low light radiating from the small lamp beside her bed, she could see that the chair where the officer had been sitting was empty.

“Constable?” she whispered, not wanting to wake anyone in the nearby bedrooms. “Constable, are you there?” Then, moving quickly towards her in the darkness, a shadowy figure wearing a peaked cap emerged from the gloom.

“Who’s that?” the nanny whispered anxiously, peering into the darkness.

The figure loomed in front of her. His gloved hands rose, one to her mouth, the other to the back of her head. Before she could

even let out a cry of alarm, Wolf Kroeger had her in his grip and was forcing her back into the bedroom.

In her panic, the nanny could think of only one thing to do. She opened her mouth wider, then bit down hard on the hand.

Kroeger felt the pain of the bite through the leather of the glove, and he felt himself suddenly become angry. He spun the woman around and kept one hand on her mouth. Before she could gather herself, Kroeger wrapped his left arm around her neck, his hand ending up beneath her left ear. Then he jerked her head violently to the left, breaking her neck with a harsh sound of cracking vertebrae.





CHAPTER FORTY

Leaving through the night with their focused rays, two sets of car headlights came swaying down the Murzaks' long drive. Kroeger saw them from the window of the darkened master bedroom, unconcerned. He'd heard on one of the officer's radios that help was on its way, but he had already prepared for their arrival.

On the bed in the darkness lay Alanka Murzak, her eyes wide with terror, her cheeks stained with tears. She was facing away from her husband, her ankles, wrists, and mouth swathed in grey tape. Beside her lay Milan Murzak, paralysed by the cone shell toxin dart, his blood pumping into a plastic container on the floor. In adjacent bedrooms, the young children were similarly trussed, petrified beyond any form of description.

Turning from the window, Kroeger glanced at his watch. The blood had been extracting for a little more than thirty minutes. He would normally hope to drain more blood from his victim, but the quantity he'd obtained so far would have to be enough. He moved to stand over his victim, then reached down, turned the pump off, and yanked the cannula from Murzak's neck, spurting blood. There was

no need to hide the signs of his handiwork now. He swiftly packed the plastic container and extraction equipment into his bag.

The police cars slowly drew to a halt outside the door to the Murzak residence. From the leading vehicle stepped a fat sergeant, belly spilling generously over his belt, and a waif-like young constable. The other police car contained two officers who looked like circus weightlifters. One had a huge moustache and big ears, while the other one was as bald as a coot, his head merging into his shoulders with no obvious signs of an intervening neck.

Mostly accustomed to dealing with wife-beaters, drunks, and highway speedsters, they were oblivious to what the next ten minutes held for them.

The fat sergeant studied the darkened house for a moment, then, stating the obvious, said, "Strange." He pushed his peaked cap to the back of his head and scratched his crown. "No lights. I thought this would just be some communications glitch or something..." As he spoke, a light came on in the front hallway. "Colin? Karen?" he called. "Where the hell are you two?"

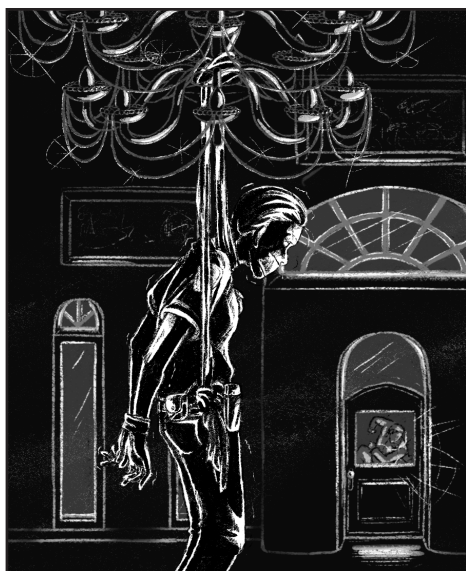
No response.

"Something's not right, Sarge," said his thin colleague.

"No shit," came the sarcastic reply. He pointed to the two weightlifters, trying to look like the leader he was never destined to be. "You two get in by the back door. Brian, come with me."

The weightlifters got back in their car and drove around to the rear of the house. As they did, the others climbed the front steps. On reaching the door, the fat officer peered through the long narrow window to the left of the door. He was frozen to the spot by the sight that met his eyes. "Jesus!" he cried in horror. The colour drained from his face.

Suspended by the neck with a bed sheet, her wrists, ankles, and mouth taped, the female police officer hung from a chandelier at the foot of the stairs in the front hallway. Her eyes bulged and her face was blue. Her bound legs were kicking—death had yet to claim her.



“Oh, Jesus!”

The thin cop looked in through the window on the other side of the door and froze. “Fuck me!”

One tried the door, but it was locked. He stood back a short distance then ran at the front door with his shoulder, bouncing off. The solid door remained intact and firmly closed.

“Let me have a go, Sarge,” said the other cop.

“Out of the fucking way!” the fat officer raged, manhandling his aide to one side, taking a deep breath, and charging the door like a wounded beast in the bullring. He bounced off again.

The other two officers pulled up outside the garage, leaving their headlights on and pointing towards the rear entrance. They then hurried across the concrete paving towards the back door. They could hear their workmates ramming the front door. Finding the back door locked, they put their shoulders to it. The door, smaller and thinner than the one at the front of the house, gave way to their combined weight of almost three hundred kilograms with a splintering of wood around the doorpost.

The bald officer was the first in through the now-open doorway, and entered the laundry. He couldn’t find a light switch, so he blundered on through the darkness with his colleague right behind him. As they did, they heard the front door crash open.

The next room was the kitchen. The bald cop found a switch just inside the door and turned on the lights, revealing a vast room with granite-topped benches, punctuated with shiny stainless steel fittings and white woodwork that stretched half the length of this wing of

the house. A neat, immaculate room, with a place for everything, and everything in its place.

“Sarge?” the bald cop called out. “Where are you?”

“Get the fuck in here, for Christ’s sake!” called the sergeant’s frantic voice from the front of the house.

The two hefty cops followed the voice out into a corridor and along to the front hallway. The front foyer was larger than many entire suburban homes. The staircase swept extravagantly away to the north, while an imported French chandelier hung in the middle of the foyer, the rapidly dying officer dangling from it.

Kroeger was counting on this horrific sight to provide a sufficient distraction for him to escape. But, as he had made for the playroom and the open window, he saw one of the cop cars coming around the back. He needed all the cops inside before he ventured out.

Standing under Karen Chung’s suspended body, the cops held her legs to take the weight off her neck and let her breathe. Her eyes had closed; she was unconscious.

“Oh, God! No!”

“Who did this?” someone asked.

“Just find a stepladder and get her down!” bellowed the sergeant.

One of them quickly set up the ladder beside the limp officer’s body, while the other supported her legs.

“Phil, we can manage here—you go radio for an ambulance, and keep your eyes peeled for the bastard who did this.”

“Right.” The bald cop hurried across the foyer and back along the corridor to the kitchen.

In the half-light from the kitchen, passing two large chest freezers, something crunched beneath his left foot. Stopping in his tracks, he stepped back and looked down. Unable to make out what had crunched, he squatted, finding what appeared to be frozen garden peas.

Now he saw the torn corner of an entire packet of frozen peas. Peering into the corner behind the open packet, he made out a pile

of intact packets of frozen food, all dripping water. It was as if the contents of one of the freezers had been hastily tossed there.

His curiosity replaced with a rising feeling of dread, he began to turn towards the freezers. As he did, the lid to the nearest white cabinet opened of its own accord, and Wolf Kroeger rose up from within it, a length of clothesline in his hands.

The plastic cord looped around the cop's neck. Kroeger tugged hard as he stood behind him, dragging the cop to his feet. Gurgling, choking, his eyes bulging and tongue hanging out, the officer reached uselessly for the chord around his throat. Realising that wasn't helping, his hands flailed for a grip on the head of his assailant. Grasping Kroeger's ears, he twisted as hard as he could.

Kroeger didn't flinch. He ignored the pain, drawing the cord a little tighter around the cop's neck.

The officer stopped struggling and blacked out, muscles twitching. His hands dropped, his body sagged. Kroeger maintained the choking pressure of the garrote for a little longer, then let the unconscious policeman slip to the floor.

From the front of the house came the sound of the other cops talking loudly. Karen's heart had stopped beating, and they were applying CPR to her on the floor.

The bald cop had slumped down into a sitting position, his back against the freezer, head sagging on his chest, eyes closed. The length of clothesline was still wrapped around his neck.

Kroeger climbed out of the freezer, stepping over his victim. Opening a cupboard, he withdrew his bag from where he had hastily stowed it only minutes before. Then he turned and slipped out the back door.

Out in the darkness once more, he made for the lake and the hiding place of his other equipment.

Another police car arrived at the gate to the Murzak property, and the senior sergeant—another testimony to the muscle and aggression-

building properties of anabolic steroids—leaned out the open driver's window and pressed the intercom button.

The fat sergeant's voice answered via the intercom. "Yes? Who is it?"

"It's me—I was in the vicinity, Bill. What's happening there?"

"We've got an officer down. I think she's dead or dying," came the traumatised voice.

"I don't have a remote. Open the gate." A second later, the electric gates began to slowly swing back.

"Keep a look out as you come down the drive, Trevor," said the voice again through the tinny intercom speaker. "We don't know how many people we're dealing with here. They could still be on the grounds."

"Turn on the spotlight," the sergeant instructed his lackey.

Once the gates opened all the way, they drove on. The police spotlight panned the beam around the ground on either side of the car as it cautiously made its way down the long driveway towards the house.

As the police car drew level with the lake, the roving light caught movement in the undergrowth. "There!" cried the young assistant.

"Where, for fuck's sake?" The car ground to a halt.

"I could have sworn I saw someone."

"Right. Let's take a look."

The pair of them got out of the car, taking out long, black Maglite flashlights and drawing their guns. The young cop was a slim, twenty-six years old, 5'10". Forty-year-old Sergeant Trevor Jarman was 6'5", with broad shoulders. He could have battled a rhinoceros without thinking about it and had never been beaten in straight fight. "You go round the lake from that side and I'll go round the other side. We'll catch him in the middle."

As the senior sergeant moved warily around to the right of the lake, shining his flashlight in his path, he occasionally flicked a glance to his left to check his assistant's progress. When he was around the

perimeter of the lake he looked left and saw the young cop's flashlight drop to the ground. "Nick? Are you all right?" he called. No reply.

A shot rang out in the night. The sergeant immediately dropped to the ground. Lying full-length, he fumbled with the Maglite and turned it off. Only then did he realise the spotlight on his police car had been shot out.

He listened keenly, but heard no sound. He decided to retrace his steps and go to his colleague's aid. Picking himself up, he ran, crouching, back towards the car, Glock 40 cal in one hand and extinguished flashlight in the other.

Heart pounding, he ran past the car and made his way around the southern side of the lake, towards the point where he had last seen his companion.

He almost tripped over the wiry young police officer. "Nick!" He flicked on his flashlight, holstered his pistol, knelt, and rolled him over. The officer was unconscious and his holster was empty. He grabbed the youth's right wrist and, thankfully, found a strong pulse. It was then he heard movement behind him. He began to rise and turn, but too late. From behind, a gloved hand clamped over his mouth and a muscled arm hooked around his throat.



He didn't panic. He was a karate black belt and a former unarmed combat instructor with the Police Academy. He was tough—very tough. Instinctively, instead of reaching for his assailant's hand or arm, he brought his right elbow back behind him with all the force he could muster. He connected with Wolf Kroeger's genitals.

Kroeger was no weakling, but neither was he Superman. He didn't let go of his grip, but he did loosen it momentarily.

This was enough for the senior sergeant. He reached up, grabbed Kroeger's left arm, dipped his own left shoulder, and pulled him forward and over it. Kroeger went flying, landing on his back, facing away from the cop. He tried to get up, raising his knees and planting his feet on the ground.

"Don't move, or I'll fire!" The cop had his gun out in a flash. Training both his gun and the flashlight on the man on the ground, and noting that he was unarmed, he edged warily around the man until he was standing looking down at him.

Kroeger froze and lay in the dirt, watching the cop.

"Not so tough after all, are we?" Trevor gloated. "Well, I tell you what I'm going to do, my friend. I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget." He returned the revolver to its holster on his right hip. "I'm going to take you apart..." It was then, while the cop's eyes were lowered for a millisecond, that Kroeger acted. His feet still placed firmly on the ground, he performed a neck spring—from the supine position, Kroeger shot to his feet with the agility of a circus acrobat, using the forward motion to crash his forehead into the policemen's nose, which was broken by the blow. Letting out a howl of pain, the cop reached for his face. And then Kroeger went to work on him, first doubling him up with a boot between the legs and felling him with a chop to the back of the neck. Once he had him on the ground, Kroeger let fly with his boot again.

Little more than a minute later, Jarman's face was a



bloody pulp. His nasal bones had been spread across his face. Both cheekbones had been fractured and all his top teeth had been knocked out. He was a bloody, groaning, snivelling mess; not even his mother would have recognised him.

Kroeger knelt on one knee beside him, grabbed his hair, and jerked his head back.

"I'm not killing you," he whispered hoarsely into the bloodied cop's ear, "so that you'll live to regret getting out of bed today." He threw the cop's disfigured head roughly back down to the ground.

The fat cop had seen the police car halt by the lake, and then, a few minutes later, he saw the vehicle turn around and head back along the drive towards the gate. Now, with the sound of the sirens of approaching ambulances and backup police vehicles on the night air, he saw, through the open front door of the Murzak mansion, a figure weaving down the drive towards the house. "Jesus Christ, the bastard's come back!" he exclaimed.

Leaving his colleagues, the fat sergeant dashed out into the night, his assistant rushing after him.

The figure was clad only in bloodied underwear. He went to the ground with a howl of pain as the two cops wrestled him onto his back.

The battered and bloodied senior sergeant tried to tell his comrades who he was, but in his condition, couldn't make himself understood. Just the same, after the initial tussle, it occurred to the two cops this wreck of a man was maybe not the offender responsible for the mayhem in the Murzak house. They handcuffed him anyway, until he could be identified.

As seven ambulances, a helicopter, the heavily armed Tactical Response Group, and half the Darwin police force converged on the property beside the sea, the message went out the man they were seeking was wearing a police uniform and driving a police patrol car.

For the rest of the night, every police car in Darwin pulled over every other police car in Darwin, pistols drawn.

With daylight, tracks would be found from the Murzak drive to the cliff face. Divers would subsequently find a police patrol car in deep water at the base of the cliffs, and, on the cliffs themselves, abseiling equipment. A Zodiac rubber dinghy, reported stolen from a Darwin fishing boat, would never be found.



CHAPTER FORTY ONE

Forster, or the individual who had been living the life of Willem Forster since 2000, yawned as he reached for his ringing office phone. He was feeling pleased with himself. Two days before, his wife had taken their daughters to visit her parents in Melbourne, and Forster had just spent the night with a Chinese restaurant owner who had been his mistress for the past eighteen months and the best screw of his life. He had come straight from her house to the office. Now he lifted the receiver. “Forster,” he announced brusquely.

“Someone from the Federal Police in Canberra for you, sir,” said his secretary. “He won’t give his name.”

“Put him through.”

There was a click, then: “Federal Police, Canberra, here,” came a voice Forster did not recognise. The accent sounded strongly South African.

Forster frowned. “Yes? What can I do for you?”

“We have mutual friends,” said the voice quietly.

“And who might that be?”

"You know who I mean. I thought you'd like to know that a Federal Police Task Force is being organised as I speak, to fly to Darwin within the next few hours."

"What for?"

"They plan to interview you, my friend." The informant paused. "I hear it's in connection with the murder in Dorset Creek."

"That's none of their business!"

"I also hear there are questions about your background, friend. If you're acquainted with an Anton Dressler, I would be making travel plans if I were you."

Forster sat bolt upright. "Who is this?"

"Someone with the best interests of a colleague at heart, you might say. From one Voortrekker to another. Someone you're mixed up with has been careless, friend. I wouldn't want to see you left holding the bag." With that, the mystery caller hung up.

"*Fok!*" Forster cursed in Afrikaans, jolted that the worst fear of his assumed life had just been realised. He slammed the receiver down. "*Fok!*" he swore again, clenching his fists, and sitting back in his chair. He fought to remain calm. He was determined not to panic, and to focus on the problem—and on the solution to that problem. He'd been through worse than this before now, and he'd always come out smiling.

Running his hands through his hair, he rose to his feet, then paced the room, thinking hard. Was the caller genuine? Was this call sponsored by the Feds? To panic him into running, an act that would be essentially an admission of guilt? It was a trick he might use himself if the situation were reversed. He stood and gazed out the window.

Then again, this guy had mentioned "mutual friends". Which mutual friends, though? Forster had been pressured into protecting "the operation" by the same international team that had created the new life for him in 2000. It had always been implicit that the favour would have to be returned from time to time. The team only used

Forster's services on rare occasions—mainly intelligence regarding police operations.

Each time he was needed, there would be a phone call involving an apparent wrong number and something to do with flowers. He might receive a call saying, "It's Maggie here, did you send the flowers?" and Forster would say, "Wrong number," or similar, then he'd call a prearranged number from a phone box. If he wasn't able to call back, he'd receive another call with a car-related word in the conversation, "We have you down to bring your car in for service," or something similar.

This format was different, but perhaps there hadn't been time to guarantee action before the Feds got to him. Forster weighed up the probabilities. He knew his bosses employed a number of South Africans around the world with backgrounds like his own. Some would be willing collaborators; others would be in similar situations to himself—being paid to help out, but under threat of being exposed if they didn't toe the line.

On the other hand, the voice could be just another South African trying to help out a fellow countryman, as he'd claimed. There was a bond between many white South Africans, wherever they were in the world, that had been reinforced by the international antipathy to them during the apartheid years. Birds of a feather flock together. Was that it? He couldn't be sure. Once he had thought it through, he made his decision. It was time to get out. Either way, people knew of his past. It would be too complicated to stay. Pulling on his jacket, he calmly walked into the outer office.

His secretary looked up from her PC with an expectant look. "Going out, Mr Forster?"

"Something's come up, Tracey—I'll be out for most of the morning. Cancel my appointments."

Five minutes later, he called the number he'd committed to memory.

"Yes?" Dorit Gazal answered.

"It's me. We need to meet. Now."

"Why?"

"Listen, girlie, the shit is about to hit the fucking fan! The AFP is on its way and it won't be to talk about the weather! I'm out of here. You'll have to arrange it. If the AFP get me, I'm cutting a deal with them. You'll be behind bars an hour later. Sort it out. Quickly."

"Okay, cool it," she responded. "I'll give you the address."

"Do you think I fell off a Christmas tree? I'm not giving you a chance to silence me. We'll meet somewhere public but discreet."

"Anywhere in mind?"

"There's a crocodile farm just south of Darwin, on the Stuart Highway—the Top End Crocodile Farm. There's another one close by—Crocadu—don't go there. The coffee shop at the Top End Crocodile Farm. Got it?"

"Uh-huh, got it."

"How soon can you can get there?"

"Two hours," she answered.

"Two hours?" he growled impatiently. "Can't you make it any sooner?"

"That's as soon as I can make it. I'm two hundred kilometres away, near Katherine. If I drive too quickly, I risk being pulled up for speeding. That'll screw things up."

Begrudgingly, he agreed. "All right, two hours. Don't let me down, girlie."

Gazal had been standing in her kitchen when Forster called. She was no more than ten minutes away from Darwin's centre. She had given herself two hours to do what was needed to silence a potential nuisance. She was due to see Kroeger sometime during the day to brief him on the latest targets, but she had no idea where or when—he would contact her.

She rang him, but there was no answer on his mobile. The course of action now was obvious. Kroeger had told her that when Forster became a liability he was to be removed from the equation. Forster

had become a major liability, capable of spilling the beans about Gazal, Kroeger, and everything he knew about the operation.

Opening the pantry, she reached in and took out an unopened pack of Splenda. It was the same brand she had seen Forster use at a burger joint the first time they had met. She had purchased the pack at a local supermarket with an occasion like this in mind. Ripping away the cellophane wrapping, she took out six little paper sachets of sweetener. Then she went to the bedroom to find her suitcase. In an inside pocket of the suitcase she located a small plastic capsule and a scalpel handle and blade. Then, very carefully, she cut a fine opening in the top of each sweetener sachets before squeezing them open and pouring half the contents of each sachet down the sink. Opening the capsule from her bag, she gently emptied a fine white powder into the sachets. The powder was noradrenaline, normally used in physiology experiments on animals. Gazal had been introduced to it a few years ago and it had come in handy on more than one occasion since then.

She shook both sachets, mixing the noradrenalin with the sweetener until it had blended into a single white powder. Placing the sachets on the kitchen counter, she opened a drawer and took out a new tube of glue and a pair of scissors. She drew a fine line of glue on the top of each sachet, then resealed them, pressing them flat until they looked like new.

Her telephone began to ring. She cursed. Hoping it wasn't Forster calling again to change the arrangement for the meeting, she picked up the phone and answered.

"Meet me in thirty minutes." It was Kroeger's voice.

"I can't. There's a problem," she responded.

"What is it?"

She told him of Forster's phone call and of the meeting they had arranged.

"Do you want me to sort it out?"

"I can handle this myself."

"Don't mess it up," he cautioned.

“He’s history. Nobody lives after noradrenaline.”

“Nobody lives after a broken neck, either,” said Kroeger, and hung up.

Gazal didn’t know whether that remark was aimed at her or Forster. His way would have been to simply kill him by violent means, but Gazal thought her way was much more elegant. Forster would simply die, and the doctors afterwards would just put it down to natural causes.



CHAPTER FORTY TWO

After parking in the almost-empty parking lot, Gazal walked to the crocodile farm's front entrance, checking her watch as she went. Still twenty minutes to go before the appointed time for the meeting with Forster.

There was an Aboriginal girl behind the ticket counter. She took Gazal's \$10 and handed her a ticket. "Have a nice time," she droned, without a hint of interest.

Gazal could not imagine anything even remotely nice about a crocodile farm.

The committee of Aboriginal elders running the farm were grateful for all and any custom that came their way these days. For ten years their farm had enjoyed a monopoly in their line of business, making a small profit and keeping a number of tribal people in employment. But then, a year ago, city people with city money had set up Crocadu down the road, throwing several million dollars at making and marketing the best crocodile attraction in the Territory. The Top End Crocodile Farm, with its tired facilities, minimal marketing budget, and handful of crocs, wasn't in the same league. It was getting further

and further in debt, subsidised by just enough government money to keep the doors open, but not enough to allow it to compete with its slick counterpart.

Gazal made her way to the dingy coffee shop. There were no customers. The long, narrow room was equipped with a dozen red Laminex tables and chrome, vinyl-covered chairs; they looked like a job lot from a 1960s auction. A handwritten sign on the front counter read, “No Table Service”. That suited Gazal just fine.

“What can I get you?” enquired a sleepy-eyed Aboriginal woman as Gazal reached the counter.

Gazal ordered a black coffee. The woman was painfully slow filling the order. Gazal checked her watch again—still fifteen minutes to go. The woman finally handed her the cup of coffee. Gazal paid, then took the cup and saucer to a table in the most distant corner and took a seat, her back to the front counter, setting her shoulder bag between her feet.

In the middle of the table were salt and pepper shakers and a bowl containing a dozen paper-wrapped sugar cubes and as many sweetener sachets. It wouldn’t have mattered to her if there hadn’t been any sugar or sweetener on display; she would have found another way to do what she planned to do. This just made it easier.

The sweetener in the bowl was a different brand to that which she had at home. This wasn’t a problem. She took all of the sachets from the bowl and discreetly dropped them into the bag at her feet. Then she took the six sachets she had brought with her from her blouse pocket and placed them in the bowl with the sugar cubes. The next customers after Forster would also die, if they used the sweetener. *Ah well*, she thought. *Collateral damage*.

A throng of Japanese tourists poured in through the front gate, chattering excitedly and photographing everything in sight as they were ushered towards the crocodile ponds. Behind them came Forster. While the Japanese were led away, the South African came into the coffee shop.

“Fucking Japs!” Forster cursed under his breath as he took a seat across the table from Gazal.

“Good to see you, too,” she said sarcastically. “Nice choice of venue.”

“Full of sons of Nippon!” he snarled. “Murdering little yellow bastards!” Forster’s grandfather—that is, Dressler’s grandfather—had been interned by the Japanese in the Dutch East Indies in 1942, and had died there. “By the way, girlie, did your people have anything to do with the death of that prostitute? Amanda Tate? Not that I mind.”

“The newspaper said she ODeD.” she shrugged.

“Did you or didn’t you? I don’t give a shit about a prostitute, I’m just interested.”

“Let’s just say that her death didn’t come as a big surprise to me. And let’s also say that we have a lot of highly trained professionals ready to clear up awkward situations. So no more blackmailing phone calls, okay? Anyway, don’t worry. We’ll look after you—and I mean in a good way. We’re not short of cash, and we’ll go through with the deal. I had to call in a lot of favours to get this shit organised so quickly—just make sure you remember that in the future. You owe me one. All right? Want a coffee?”

“I’ll get my own.” Forster got to his feet and went to the counter. He ordered a white coffee. As before, the woman behind the counter took a painfully long time to fill the order. Forster’s impatience grew as she bumbled around with boiled milk and coffee. He was almost going to tell her to forget it, but she finally handed him a brimming cup. He paid her then returned to the table.

“So, what’s the problem?” Gazal asked. She looked into his face, deliberately not watching his hands to see if he reached for the sweetener.

“The problem, girlie,” he leaned closer and lowered his voice, “the problem is, I stuck my neck out for your firm, and now the Federal Police are about to cut my head off.” He took one of the sweetener

sachets from the bowl and ripped the top off it with just a downward glance. His eyes came back up onto Gazal's face.

"How do you know that?" Gazal asked.

"A friend in Canberra rang me. There's an AFP task force on its way up here right now. This is all going to blow up in our faces unless you get me out of here. Your boss in Paris got me into this. I've done all that was asked of me—and more!" His tone was one of anger,



the look in his eyes accusatory. He took his eyes off her now as he poured the contents of the sachet into his coffee, then cast the empty packet aside.

"Okay," she replied calmly. "Like I said, I'll arrange it. Don't get shitty with me. I've been the one looking after your interests."

"Maybe, maybe not. So take care of the arrangements now," he snarled.

She reached into her bag for her mobile.

"And tell them I want the two million, as agreed, in cash. US dollars." Forster was ready to go. He'd kept a secret Swiss bank account for years in case he needed to leave the country in a hurry and start yet another new life. He would leave behind an Australian wife and three young daughters who had never heard of Anton Dressler. He would miss them for a while—but, what the hell, Forster had a simple philosophy for survival: He who has no emotional baggage travels best.

Gazal nodded towards the door. "Wait outside while I make the call."

He shook his head. "Do you think I'm a fool? I want to hear what's said."

She glared at him. "We're on the same side, you know."

"Just do it."

She sighed, then tapped a number into the phone, pressed "Call", and put the phone to her ear.

Forster took up the plastic spoon from the saucer and stirred his coffee, then sat back and watched her without putting the cup to his lips.

"This is me," said Gazal. "I'm with our local contact. Something's come up and he needs to get out, fast. An offshore trip—today. Can you make the necessary arrangements?" Her eyes on the South African, she decided to try a little psychology trick. She lifted her own coffee cup to her lips and drank down the remaining contents.

To Gazal's relief, Forster picked up the subconscious hint; he leaned forward, picked up his cup, and took a sip of coffee.

"Got it," replied the voice at the other end of the phone. "You need a hand with that guy?"

"It's under control," Gazal assured him. "Just remember that it's got to be today. He also wants the parcel he agreed on with our French uncle to be waiting for him. He wants it to be portable, and the colour he prefers is green. So we have to make the necessary arrangements to accommodate him. Is that clear?"

"A night flight to infinity?" asked the voice.

"A night flight, that's right. So, we'll get back to him with the details, okay? At two pm?"

"Done."

Gazal pressed "End", then smiled at Forster. "All fixed."

He leaned towards her. "When? And how?"

"Tonight," she answered. "A private airplane."

He produced a tight smile. "Good. Where, and when?"

"You'll have to call me later for the details. They're setting it up."

He frowned. "Call you when?"

"They're calling me at two this afternoon. You call me at 2:15. In the meantime, make yourself scarce. Lay low."

Forster pulled a face. "I want it all worked out here and now." He trusted no one—never had, never would.

"Do I look like a fucking magician?" she returned in a low growl. "These things can't be arranged at the drop of a hat! We've got to get two million dollars in cash. How the hell do you think we can rustle that up immediately? You'll just have to be patient. Call me at 2:15." She got up.

Now his cellphone began to ring. He grimaced. Very few knew his number. If it was a call to do with police business, he didn't want to know—the minute he had walked out of the office that morning, he had turned his back on his life as deputy commissioner. Now only the future was important—and getting out of this godforsaken place. But then, he reasoned, maybe the call was another warning from his anonymous South African friend.

"Yes?" he said gruffly.

"Oh, Mr Forster, sir, thank goodness you answered."

"What is it?" Instinctively he turned away from Gazal, lowering his voice. "What's the problem?"

"The commissioner is looking for you, sir," Forster's secretary told him. "It's very urgent, apparently. I told him you were out for the morning, but he was quite angry. I told him I didn't know where you were, sir, but he was really quite rude."

"It's alright, Tracey. Tell the commissioner I'll be back in the office within two or three hours and I'll go straight to his office. Okay?"

"Okay, yes, sir," she replied, sounding relieved.

He terminated the call. He knew why the commissioner wanted to see him. The balloon had gone up. The AFP would have called the commissioner to tell him they were on their way, and why. Forster decided he would drive his unmarked police car to a hiding place he had marked out years ago for just such an eventuality and would then move on to a studio apartment he kept in an assumed name, and there await the night flight out. Once out of the country, he'd get his

hands on some of his money and organise a false passport. Then, he would simply melt away.

“Everything under control?” Gazal asked.

“Nothing I wasn’t expecting.”

“Okay. Anything else you want to bring up while I’m here? Otherwise...”

He pulled a face. “Okay, I’ll call you. Don’t let me down, or I’ll come looking for you and I won’t be ringing your doorbell with flowers and chocolates in my hands.”

She pulled herself to her feet. “Call me at 2:15 sharp. And give me a ten-minute start—we shouldn’t be seen leaving together.” She walked away without a backward glance.

He watched her depart, admiring the way her pear-shaped butt filled her tight jeans.

“Like our crocs?” asked the young woman in the ticket box in a sleepy tone.

“Yeah, great,” Gazal returned without enthusiasm.

A tall tourist wearing mirrored sunglasses, plaid pants, a goatee beard, and a baseball cap was standing close to the entrance with three cameras slung around his neck, taking pictures of the entrance as she emerged. She hurried past him. The parking area was still virtually empty; apart from a tourist bus with Japanese script painted in red on the side and her Land Cruiser, the only other vehicles were an Audi A5 sedan—Forster’s—a white Holden Commodore and a red Ford Mondeo.

She waited in her Land Cruiser, watching the crocodile farm’s exit. If Forster emerged and drove away, she’d know he hadn’t drunk the remainder of his coffee, and then she’d follow him and eliminate him using a less sophisticated means: a silenced Glock automatic.

Back in the coffee shop, Forster sat waiting for the minutes to pass. He looked down into the coffee cup in front of him, still half full. He picked up the cup and downed the contents in a single gulp.

There was a sudden babble of conversation behind him. He turned to see the Japanese tourists piling into the coffee shop, all talking at once in their native tongue.

Cursing the Japanese yet again to himself, Forster checked his watch. Time he was on his way. He wasn't waiting all of ten minutes in this dump.



He could feel his pulse racing. It wasn't like him to let a tight situation affect him like this. Then he felt something warm trickle down his top lip. He couldn't believe that his nose was running—that definitely wasn't like him. He dabbed his nostril with the back of his hand. Taking his hand away, he was astonished to see blood on his knuckles. He had never had a nose bleed in his life. And as he started to

stand up, he was conscious of a dull ache gripping his skull. Coming to his feet, he was hit by a lancing pain on the right side of the head. Gritting his teeth, he put a hand to his temple. The pain increased in intensity until it felt as if his skull was being crushed. He had never suffered from migraines in the past. Face screwed up, he turned to the counter, intent on getting some aspirin to ease the pain. Blood was now pouring from his nose.

The Japanese were clustered around the counter, clamouring for the attention of the Aboriginal woman, all talking at once in Japanese and fractured English.

His vision starting to blur, Forster staggered, one hand to his splitting head and the other grasping for the counter. "Aspirin," he called, pushing startled tourists aside. "Give me aspirin."

"Wait your turn, mister," said the frazzled woman behind the counter without looking at him as she tried to decipher the requests of her foreign customers.

Forster grasped his exploding skull with both hands. "My head! My head!" he screamed. The room swam before his eyes. He grabbed at the counter to support himself, but only succeeded in grasping a cutlery tray. Knives, forks, and spoons went flying around him as he collapsed to the floor. There he lay on his back. Tourists quickly stepped back from him. Women were screaming. The lady behind the counter stood staring down at the man on the floor.

A small, neatly dressed Japanese tourist in round spectacles pushed through the crowd and knelt beside Forster. He was an endocrinologist from Osaka, a specialist in gland diseases. He calmly unfastened Forster's collar and loosened his tie, then felt his wrist. Forster's pulse was rapid, his pupils were dilated, and there was a burst blood vessel in his left eye. He saw that Forster had suddenly grown deathly pale, yet his face was hot and bathed in perspiration. These were symptoms that suggested a disease called phaeochromocytoma, that causes secretion of noradrenalin from a kidney tumour.

Summoned by the screams of the women, a crocodile farm attendant came running. A tall, young Aboriginal youth of about twenty years old stood looking down at Forster, wide-eyed and helpless. "What should I do?" he implored, to no one in particular.

The doctor looked up at him, a severe expression on his face. "I am doctor. This man very ill. You call ambulance. Very urgent. You understand?"

The young man nodded and hurried away to place the emergency call.

Seven minutes later, the paramedics had arrived and put Forster in the back of an ambulance. He was attached to a heart monitor and had an intravenous drip set up.

“What his blood plessure?” asked the Japanese doctor.

“350 over 260,” replied the paramedic.

“We give infusion. Very urgent.”

“What of?” asked the paramedic. The doctor ferreted through the paramedic’s medical bag. He pulled out glass vials of labetalol to drop the blood pressure, dexamethasone to reduce swelling of the brain, and diazoxide to eliminate excess fluid. The doctor’s objective was to prevent Forster from suffering a massive stroke, to prevent his heart from developing an irregularity, and to prevent compression of the brain, any one of which could be fatal. Without asking the paramedics, he prepared an IV line. He knew that if this man was not treated immediately, he would die. He snapped the ends off the glass vials and rapidly injected the life-saving medication.



CHAPTER FORTY THREE

Dorit Gazal had seen the ambulance take Forster away. She had driven off from the crocodile farm feeling pleased with herself—it had been a neat job. Forster would almost certainly be DOA at hospital.

But only a few miles down the Stuart Highway on her way back to Darwin, Gazal noticed a red Ford Mondeo in her rear-view mirror, tailing her, hanging well back. She sped up. The red Ford sped up. She slowed down. The red Ford slowed down, all the while maintaining contact at approximately the same distance.

She remembered a red Ford had been in the parking lot at the crocodile farm. Gazal's job was based on her talents of observation, talents that for years had kept her very well remunerated—and alive. She was certain she hadn't been followed to the crocodile farm, but it occurred to her that maybe the red Ford had followed Forster to the crocodile farm and had now latched onto her.

Then she remembered the guy taking photographs of the entrance, photographs that could have included her. As far as Gazal was concerned, the driver of the red Ford was probably the same guy.

So who was he? A cop? Someone working for Kroeger? Or a figment of her over-cautious imagination? When she checked the mirror again, a dirty delivery van had slipped onto her tail. But the red Ford was still there, behind the delivery van.

Only one way to find out if he was following her. When a filling station appeared ahead, she slowed, put on her indicator, and slid into the driveway. As she got out of her vehicle and walked to the rear, she discreetly watched the delivery van and red Ford pass. The red car didn't slow, just kept going and disappeared down the highway.

She topped up the car's tank, paid the cashier, then got back behind the wheel and continued on her journey into the city. The first time she checked the mirror, there was no sign of the red Ford. The next time she checked, it was there again, two vehicles back. Gazal decided to give the red Ford one more test, just to make sure.

At red traffic signals, she moved to the right lane, flicking her indicator on. The red Ford drew up behind her, also with its indicator flashing for a right turn. Gazal glanced at the driver in her rear-view mirror—he had a goatee beard, mirrored glasses, and a baseball cap. She was sure it was the guy with the camera from the parking lot.

The lights changed to green. The vehicles in the inside lanes moved off, proceeding straight ahead. Gazal remained stationary. Then, as soon as a gap appeared in the traffic, she planted her foot on the gas pedal and accelerated away, straight ahead.

As she sped off, she flicked a glance to the mirror. The red Ford had followed suit, hadn't turned right, and was powering after her. She charged to the next set of traffic lights with the Ford close behind. Ahead, the signals were changing to red. Gazal switched to the vacant right lane, but didn't slow down.

Startled pedestrians jumped out of the way as the white Land Cruiser went through the red light and careered around the corner, tyres squealing. Cars clamped on their brakes or swerved aside as Gazal performed a U-turn that kicked the big 4WD vehicle up on two wheels. Then she sped off back along the road in the opposite

direction, tyres smoking. Out of the melee of vehicles in her rear, she saw a police car emerge and chase after her. Its red and blue lights began to flash and its siren began to wail—the police thought they were merely on the tail of a speedster.

On the opposite side of the road, the red Ford slewed to a halt at the lights with a screech of rubber on bitumen. Behind the wheel, Vickers cursed aloud.

This had been the object of the exercise, to identify and follow anyone Forster made contact with. Through a gap in the fence, Vickers had seen Forster talking with this woman in the coffee shop. But now, not only was the woman aware he had been following her, she had managed to give him the slip. There was no way he could risk chasing her while a police car was doing the same.

Reluctantly, he turned right and drove sedately on. Picking up the phone beside him, he called Julia.

“I lost her.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you later. What’s happening with Forster?”

“Looks like he’s being taken to Darwin General Hospital. We’re following.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“Keep your fingers crossed he doesn’t die on us,” she came back. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him, but you aren’t rushed to hospital in an ambulance for a cut finger.”

“What do you think it could be?”

“God knows. A heart attack, maybe. We’ll have to wait and see.”

He silently blessed the inventor of the mobile phone. The plan had been for one of them to tail Forster while the other moved ahead, then they would switch places. They had kept in touch via their

phones, arranging change-over locations so that Forster wouldn't spot a particular car following him.

Gazal threw off the chasing police car with comparative ease. The Mossad had taught her evasive driving techniques, and she had been a good student. She dumped the Land Cruiser in a back street; the police had its registration and it was now a liability. She caught a bus into the city then took a cab to her house.

When she telephoned Darwin General Hospital an hour later, fully expecting to hear that Forster was dead, she was horrified to learn that she'd failed. Later on, she was told that he was off the "critical" list and was now stable.

Forster would work out Gazal had tried to kill him. She had to finish the job; if she didn't, Kroeger would finish *her*.

It was becoming obvious to her that this entire operation was jinxed. Time and again, things had gone wrong, things that had been totally out of her control. The thugs turning up at the Rivers house out of the blue and the old guy with the dog—all things that had eroded Kroeger's confidence in her. She couldn't afford to fail again. Not with something as important as this. There had been enough noradrenaline in that vial to kill several men of Forster's size. How he'd survived, she could only guess. When introduced to noradrenaline several years back, she'd been warned that one in a thousand might have the constitution to survive the effects of the drug. Apparently, Forster was that one in a thousand.

This situation called for drastic measures. If Forster told the Federal Police what he knew, not only Gazal but the entire operation would be compromised. Kroeger only needed a few more days. He would have been finished by now had Paris not sent word that the quota requirement had increased. Kroeger had always been working against time to provide enough serum before the Nigerian deadline

dawned. Now he had an added time problem. Even though he was satisfied the meddlesome Dorset Creek cop and doctor had been effectively sidelined, it wouldn't be long before someone else woke up to the fact more and more of Darwin's population were meeting their maker with each passing day. All he needed was a few more days, and then he—and Gazal—would be out of here.

It was visiting hours when Gazal arrived at the hospital and was able to mingle with the coming and going public unnoticed. Taking an elevator to level G, she went looking for the operating suite. Several operating theatres were in use, which was a promising sign.

Slipping into the nurses' changing room, she found half a dozen white nurses' uniforms on hangers. Dangling from the front of each uniform was the plastic ID card of the owner, complete with head and shoulders photograph.

Gazal did a little mixing and matching. She took a uniform she could fit into and slipped it over her shorts and T-shirt. None of the nurses in the photographic mug shots looked remotely like her, so she chose the ID of a woman with short dark hair not dissimilar to her own and pinned it to the front of the uniform. In Gazal's experience, nobody looked at the pictures on ID cards. Just the fact there was one hanging from the uniform would be enough. Her shoulder bag contained a silenced Glock, cocked and ready to perform its deadly act. She had come fully prepared to put a bullet in Forster's brain. A senior cop makes plenty of enemies, and it was quite feasible one might go as far as shooting him to settle an old grudge. It had happened many times before, and it would happen again. Slinging the bag over her shoulder, she checked herself in the mirror. The nurse's uniform didn't exactly suit her muscled frame, but it would pass casual inspection.

Out in the corridor, no one gave her a second glance. She went looking for a vacant nurses' station. When she found one, identified by a sign as G2, she slipped behind the desk. There was an internal telephone directory taped to the desk beside the phone. She ran her

finger down it until she came to “Operator-962”. While she was waiting for the operator to answer, she glanced at a list lying on the desk showing patients’ names and procedures required. Next to the first name on the list, “manual evacuation” had been written.

“Operator.”

“Yes, I’m calling from G2,” said Gazal. “I’ve been sent to do a manual evacuation on a Willem Forster, but they’ve given me the wrong ward number. Can you tell me where I’m supposed to be?”

“What ward were you given?” asked the woman at the other end of the phone.

Gazal looked at the nearest ward number. “Er, 12G,” she advised.

“Just a moment. Ah, here he is. Forster, Willem. No, dear, they got that terribly wrong. He’s down in 11B. There’s an asterisk next to his name—he’s under police guard. You’ll have to show your ID to the officer outside the ward.”

“Thanks a lot.” Gazal hung up.

She took an elevator down a level, then began following signs along a maze of corridors towards Forster’s ward.

Rounding a corner, she saw a sign identifying the doorway she needed. She couldn’t see any police, which was strange. She walked to the door, paused, reached inside the bag with her right hand, and opened the door with her left. First turning to look up and down the corridor to make sure no one was watching, she pushed the door open and stormed inside.

She was through the door, her menacing matte black Glock quickly drawn out of the bag and pointed at the bed—the empty bed.

“Fuck!” Swinging to her left, there was a door, slightly ajar. She strode across the room and kicked the door open, Glock at the ready. The door shuddered back against the wall, revealing a small bathroom. It was empty too. “Fuck!” she said again. Either she had been given the wrong room number or Forster had been moved somewhere else.

Shoving the pistol back into her bag, she hurried to the door, unsure about what to do and where to go next. Opening the door,

she walked straight into a tall man in a suit standing with his back to the door.

“Oh, sorry,” he began, turning to her. He was an agent with the Federal Police, one of the six officers assigned to maintain a watch on Willem Forster. He smiled at Gazal.

“I was looking for a Willem Forster,” she said.

The officer, a man with a reputation for a roving eye, was looking her up and down approvingly. He liked athletic women. “He’s in...” He stopped in mid-sentence as his eyes, descending to look at her legs, took in her footwear. No nurse he had seen wore Reeboks, but this one did. His eyes came up to her chest—not to admire her breasts, but to inspect the ID card pinned to the front of her white uniform. And then he saw a photograph of the head and shoulders of a nurse who bore little resemblance to this woman. His eyes widened in realisation.



Too late—Gazal was grasping his shoulders and her knee was coming up between his legs, hard. He let out a howl of pain and buckled over.

Gazal knew there was little choice now. She pushed the gasping man aside and hurried down the corridor. In retrospect, it would have been better to have clubbed the police officer over the head with the gun—or to have killed him. Her face had

been seen, and she still had no idea where to find Forster.

The Fed had sunk to his knees, but, despite the excruciating pain, he quickly dragged himself back to his feet, reaching for his Smith & Wesson revolver in the shoulder under his jacket. “Stop!” he called

weakly, determined to apprehend this woman. His partner was with Forster in the MRI suite.

Gazal began to run. In the middle of a crowded hospital, with a cop on her tail, a clean getaway was not going to be the easiest thing in the world. She pushed aside a woman with a drip on wheels and elbowed past several nurses. Coming to a door marked “Exit”, she pushed it open and slipped through.

From the other end of the crowded corridor, the Fed spotted her. He loped down the corridor after his prey, revolver drawn. Reaching the door, he opened it and warily stepped onto what turned out to be the landing of the internal fire escape, entering a grey world of bare concrete.

There was no sign of the mystery nurse—he couldn’t even hear her fleeing footsteps. Where was she? The door at his back was slowly swinging closed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement behind the shutting door and began to turn.

Gazal launched herself at him. Because he was turning, she knew it wasn’t possible to grip around his neck. Instead, she lowered her head, barrelling into him like a gridiron footballer. The effect of her rush was to catapult him into the concrete block wall opposite.

He hit the wall unprepared. His forehead rammed into the concrete with a thud. For a moment, he was knocked senseless. He crumpled to his knees.

Gazal was onto him again before his head could clear, kicking the revolver from his hand. It went clattering down the steps. Then, from behind the kneeling figure, she reached over his shoulders. With her left hand she took a firm grip of his right lapel as her right hand gripped his left lapel. With her arms crossed beneath his throat, she pulled upwards, hard.

The Fed began to panic. Gazal’s strong arms were pressing against the carotid artery on either side of his neck. The harder she tugged at the jacket lapels, the more pressure she placed on the neck and on the carotids, cutting off the blood supply to the hapless officer’s brain.

This was the sleeper hold, one of the first holds Dorit Gazal had learned in her Israeli Army unarmed combat training course years before. Unless the pressure was quickly released, the Fed would pass out. Maintained for long enough, the hold could kill, or leave the victim brain-damaged.

Desperately, the Fed reached up, grabbing his assailant's hands, trying to prise them from his lapels. At the same time, he began to pedal his legs, trying to get to his feet. With her powerful arms clamped in place and her knees in her victim's back for leverage, Gazal was not going to be shifted. The cop blacked out. His arms dropped, and his body went limp.

Even though she made her escape from the hospital, Gazal knew this was a royal screw-up. The noradrenalin should have killed Forster, but it hadn't, and now he had police protection. It was only a matter of time before he started squealing like a stuck pig, if he hadn't already. Gazal had just one imperative now—get the hell out of Australia.

She had the cab driver take her slowly to her rented house, then cruise around the area, just to make sure there was no sign of Kroeger or the Land Cruiser she'd given him. Satisfied, she left the cab a few blocks away from her rented house. Walking quickly, bag over her shoulder, she made her way to the house. The personal belongings there were of no consequence. What she needed lay hidden in an empty cornflake packet in the garage under the house—another false passport in yet another name, and \$26,000 in US currency. This was her emergency fund, enough to get her out of the country and to a place where she could access her foreign bank accounts.

She opened the side door, stepped inside the garage under the house, and turned on the light. The garage was windowless, gloomy and dingy, with a pile of cardboard boxes from a previous tenant lining the rear. She hurried to the cardboard pile and lifted two boxes away to reveal one on the bottom level. Bending over, she reached into the box. She pulled away sheets of bubble wrap and located a

cornflake packet. Gazal's face dropped: The packet was empty. She shook it in disbelief.

"Looking for this?" came a voice from behind her.

Gazal spun around. Kroeger was standing there. In his hand he held Gazal's false passport and a wad of cash. "Forster isn't dead, is he?" he said, in a low, menacing voice. "You've screwed up again."

"Forster's dead," she lied.

Kroeger shook his head. "I was there."

She paled. "Where?"

"The hospital."

Gazal knew her luck and her time had run out—it was him or her, now. She grabbed for the Glock in her bag.

But Kroeger was already in motion, a lion springing to the attack. His left foot came up under her right elbow, knocking her arm up into the air and away from the bag. In almost the same movement he was swivelling in the opposite direction, bringing his right foot up under her chin.

Gazal went reeling back, onto the pile of cardboard boxes. Before she could recover, Kroeger was on top of her, rolling her over and applying a lock to her neck. She cried out. He yanked hard to the left. There was a loud crack as her neck snapped.





CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

Willem Forster woke up to beeping. He was disorientated and had a dull, throbbing headache. At first his eyes wouldn't focus, but after a few seconds, he was able to make out the regular pattern of the fluorescent tube diffuser panel on the ceiling. The beeping sound echoed, getting louder and then softer. The light on the ceiling looked like it was disappearing as it got smaller, then became larger, like a zoom lens being cycled back and forth. His mind was fighting to make sense of where he was, and even *what* he was.

After what seemed like an eternity, the mists started clearing and patches of memory flashed through his mind: A blonde woman, then a large crocodile, then an Asian face staring at him. The Japanese doctor appeared then disappeared just as quickly. The ambulance, the tubes, the defibrillator, the people in white coats rushing around, the blinding headache and brilliant white light. Forster's foggy brain struggled to put the pieces together. In the distance, he could hear a female voice. "He's woken up again. Call the neurologist—he's in the procedure room."

In a croaky voice, Forster uttered, “Where am I?” without even really knowing what the words meant.

“You’re in hospital, Willem. You’ve been very ill, but you’re safe now.”

“How did I get here?”

“The doctor will explain everything soon. You had a stroke at the crocodile park. Dr Takayami saved your life. You were very lucky he was close by.”

The first thought that came to Forster’s mind was disgust that one of those revolting yellow bastards had laid his filthy hands on him. He shuddered at the thought.

“Yes, Willem, Dr Takayami was on holiday from Japan. He saw you take ill. When the ambulance arrived, he administered the medicines. You owe your life to him.” Forster shuddered again.

“So, back with us, Mr Forster?” asked an overly chirpy male voice. The neurologist swept into the room like a king greeting his courtiers.

“What do you remember about yesterday, Mr Forster?”

“Headache, blinding headache, and bright light. I got a nosebleed, and there was cutlery falling everywhere—then nothing.”

“You had a very lucky escape. There was an endocrinologist over from Japan who was sitting close by. He saved your life.”

Forster wished people would stop mentioning this. He felt defiled. Someday he would get even with that little yellow bastard for touching him.

“Sorry to have to mention this, Mr Forster, but the NT top brass want to speak to you as soon as possible. Do you feel up to a chat with them? I can put them off if you want some more time.”

Forster thought for a few seconds. Gazal had clearly done something to him—the little cunt had put something in his coffee, no doubt. Well, she’d failed, but Forster knew exactly the sort of people Gazal worked with, and he knew that they’d be back to finish the job. He had to make contingency plans. Running away from the hospital was not an option—not yet. For that, he would need travel

arrangements, and now that Gazal wasn't going to help him, he wasn't sure who he could contact. Plus, the police knew about his assumed identity. No, running was not an option. The best he could do would be to try to cut a deal. He had information his colleagues wanted. They would want to try to reduce the fallout from a high-ranking police officer being implicated in serial killings.

"Might as well see them straight away, Doctor. If they're close by, ask them to come in."

"There are two police officers outside the room and six in the foyer, all with machine guns and bullet-proof vests. We've never seen so many police in our department before. They say you're very important, and you have to be protected at all costs. It's like something out of a Bond movie."

Forster just shrugged. "They're just being melodramatic, probably because I'm their boss."

"Their boss?"

"Yes. I'm the deputy police commissioner."

"I thought I recognised your name. Ah well, that would explain it. They're just looking after you. I'll tell the sergeant that you're feeling better."

Ten minutes later, the police commissioner was sitting by Forster's bedside.

"How the hell did you get yourself into this mess, Bill? I'm not going to be able to save you from the wolves—this has gone too far. Do you want to make a statement?"

Forster looked up at the commissioner and smiled—an evil, gloating smile.

"You're not going to fuck me over, Tom. I'll tell you exactly what you're going to do. You're going to get the police minister over here pretty damn fucking quickly, that's what you're going to do. If he's not here in the next hour, you're going to find out anything. Any more deaths will be on your head. I'll make sure the media runs with

that—then you can kiss your political future goodbye. Now get on the phone.”

The police commissioner looked shocked. He was very much a titular head of the NT Police, happy to sit in his big office or turn up at functions and pontificate on the problems facing society, but he left virtually all executive decisions to Forster. The commissioner played golf and ceded the running of affairs to other people.

“Bill, I can’t just call the police minister down here at the drop of a hat. He’s an important man. He has meetings scheduled, surely.”

“You mean meetings with that tart he keeps in Brinkley Point? Or perhaps meetings with Ronnie Cox, the casino owner? Tell that fat tub of lard he’s got one hour. Tell him to use the jet if necessary. And tell him if he doesn’t get here soon, my next interview will be with the press. One hour. Understood?”

The commissioner nodded. Although Willem Forster hadn’t made any reference to the police commissioner’s own courtesan, the commissioner was well aware that Forster knew about her—where she lived, what she did—and, worst of all, what she *used* to do.

Ever a realist, the commissioner got straight onto the police minister and gave him the news.

“You’ve got to be kidding, Tom. I can’t just drop everything to speak to a bent cop. Tell him no. You’ll have to deal with it yourself.”

“No-can-do, sir. He says he’s going public if you’re not there in an hour. He knows about your friend in Brinkley Point, and your cosy relationship with Ronnie Cox, too. No telling what else he knows. Might be better if you did turn up.”

“I guess you’re right. He wants a deal, no doubt. Any idea what he’s after?”

“Immunity, free passage—the usual. Wouldn’t you do the same?”

“How would we square it with the press, though? If they got hold of any deals we did, they’d crucify us.”

“He’s bogus—not the real Willem Forster, so we can do the deal with Anton Dressler, not Willem Forster. Then we can say that

since there's been an attempt on his life, we're simply putting him in a witness-protection program. The good thing about that is, no questions are asked—and, even if they are, we won't have to answer them.”

“Don't you check people out before giving them jobs, Tom? What in Christ's name went wrong?”

“Subject for later discussion. At the moment, we've got to get Forster or Dressler or whatever his name is out of the Northern Territory and make sure he disappears. He'll give us valuable information, no doubt, and if we ever get challenged on the subject, we can say that in an attempt to save lives, we compromised on not prosecuting him. It could be a win-win situation for us.”

“Will he want money?”

“Yes. Besides, I want him to have money. If he doesn't, then he's got a reason to sell this story one day. With money, he'll probably be satisfied to keep his mouth shut.”

“How much, do you reckon?”

“I'm sure he's got money salted away. We could offer him three million. That'll give him \$150,000 a year in interest—enough to keep his mouth shut. You can take it from the Police Development Fund.”

“Jesus, Tom, that was supposed to be used to build the new games hall. Fucking hell. Ah well, another few years' wait won't hurt them.”

Tom paused. “Another thing, sir—we let Forster suspend Vickers. He was the one who knew all along that Forster was bad news.”

“Well that's probably easily sorted, Tom. We'll make him deputy commissioner. He's not going to turn that down, and we do have a vacancy now.”

“That's going to put a few assistant commissioners' noses out of joint.”

“Tom, they sit in big offices talking crap all day. Maybe it's time we put a working Aussie cop in charge.”

Tom shrugged. “Well, Vickers will make a good deputy.”

“I hope he makes a better deputy than the last one you appointed,” the police minister said sarcastically. “What an unbelievable shambles. We’ll be lucky to get out of this with our hides intact. Shit a brick. Okay, I’ll be down at the hospital in thirty minutes.”

Forster was back to his old scheming self. He was tucking into a large breakfast and decided he’d ask for \$5 million, a new passport, and glowing references. Would South America do? Maybe Canada. It was time for a change, anyway. He was fed up with the Northern Territory.

The senior nurse interrupted his chain of thought. “Willem, there are some gentlemen to see you.”

“I think you mean Mr Forster. Isn’t that right, nurse?” Forster gave the nurse a black look.

“Sorry, Mr Forster. Shall I send them in?”

“Yes, show them in, nurse.”

The nurse swallowed her pride and showed the two immaculately suited politicians in.

“Willem, how good to see you. You’ve had quite a scare—feeling better, I hope?” The police minister sounded like he was meeting a local head of state.

“Cut the crap. \$5 million, immunity, witness protection, passport, house abroad, and the best reference you’ve ever given in your life—one that makes it sound like the sun shines out of my butt. In return, you get full disclosure and, most of all, me off your hands. I’m not prepared to negotiate. Take it or leave it.”

“\$3 million—that’s it.”

“\$5 million. If you offer me a cent less, you can fuck off out of here and I’ll take my chances.”

The commissioner looked at the police minister, who nodded. He turned to Forster. “I’ll get the paperwork typed up. What name on the passport?”

Forster thought for a few seconds. “Make it out in the name of John Wilson.”

“John Wilson? That’s not very inventive.”

“Safety in numbers, Tom. Anyone who’s doing a search on John Wilson will have their work cut out for them.”

“Ever the survivor, eh, Willem? Or should I call you Anton?”

“Never heard of him. I’ll see you back here within the hour. Oh, and Tom.”

“Yes, Willem?”

“Ask the nurse to get me some more bacon, would you?”



CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

Vickers' musings were penetrated by an urgent knocking on his door. He let out a sigh, almost grateful for the opportunity to put his thoughts on hold. He opened the door to find Julia there, holding a dog-eared sheaf of papers and wearing an almost triumphant smile.

"Vic, do you have a copy of today's local paper?"

"Yes. Why?"

Julia pushed past him and thrust the papers into his hand. "Look at page three," she said.

Deputy Commissioner Vickers closed the door and followed her into the room, examining the papers in his hand—their worn copy of the Factor 8 recipient list. As he did that, Julia found the copy of the day's *Northern Territory News* and started flipping urgently through the pages.

On the list of haemophiliacs for the Northern Territory, Vickers found a name highlighted: Father David Laughton, St Patrick's Presbytery, Perret Street, Darwin.

"Okay, Julia, I'm intrigued. What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for an advertisement for a recital at St Patrick's tonight," she advised, without taking her eyes from the newspaper. "There should be an ad here somewhere." She turned another page. "It was just mentioned on the TV."

"You're not thinking of going out to a recital tonight?" he responded with a frown. "It's too late for..."

"An *Albinoni* recital," she informed him.

"Albinoni?"

"Found it!"

She was pointing to an advert for a recital by renowned Austrian organist Kurt Petzl with the Darwin Symphony Orchestra at St Patrick's Presbytery that evening. The concert tour had been organised by Father Laughton, with the proceeds going to church charities. They had just arrived in Darwin after sell-out recitals in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide. Vickers read the list of featured composers. Along with Bach, Domenico Zipoli, Georg Bolum, Paulus Sivert, and César Franck, there was Tomaso Albinoni. He looked up at Julia. "An Albinoni recital," he said, "at Father Laughton's church."

She was smiling. "And you know what I'm thinking?"

He was smiling now, too. "So tonight's the big night?"

She hugged Vickers round the waist. "He's going to be there. We'll finally get him. You should let your officers know. This time, he's not going to get away."

Vickers looked genuinely shocked. "No way! If there's a big police presence, Van Der Hul won't do the job. Besides, he feeds on the confusion of large numbers of people. Have you forgotten what he did in Brinkley Point?"

"Vic, don't give me that shit. You just want him for yourself, don't you? You want the *High Noon* showdown. I know how your mind works. You're going to go in, guns blazing, and bag yourself the killer." She grasped his shoulders and looked him in the eye. "Vic, this man is hardly human. He disabled about six cops single-handed. Three of them were massive. One of them was a 6'5" black belt in karate.

You're tough—the toughest I've ever met—but you're no match for this maniac. He'll kill you—and for what? You could have the whole area surrounded with plain clothes police officers. You could order helicopters. You could order the army, for Christ's sake. Don't do this alone, Vic. You've done enough. Leave it to others, now, or at least accept some help." Tears were beginning to well up in Julia's eyes.

"You're right, Jules, I do want him for myself," Vickers said. "But believe me—if we send in the troops, we'll lose him again, and that means more deaths that I could have prevented. I swore to protect and serve. Sometimes the odds are stacked against a cop. Soldiers in the Middle East face this every day. I'm not going to dodge my responsibility. I'll get this killer—I'm the best one for the job. Come on, Jules. I haven't done too badly so far, have I?"

"You haven't come up against Van Der Hul. He's brutal, and he seems to be able to thread himself through the eye of a needle. Vic, please. Don't go."

"Sorry, Jules, no can do. I'm going to see him in handcuffs or dead."

"If that's your final word on the matter, so be it—but I'm coming with you."

"You are not! You've just said that he's a vicious killer. What use would you be?" As he said the words, he realised how badly they had come out. "I didn't mean it in the way it sounded. I meant—"

"You meant that, since I'm a woman, I can't look after myself, right?"

"That's not quite what I meant." Vickers paused, searching for the right words. "What if he came at you with a knife—what would you do then? You're not a fighter. I am."

"It's like this, Vic: Either you take me with you, or I'm going to call the police and the media and there'll be everyone and his dog there."

"You'd compromise a serial killer being brought to justice just so that you can get your own way?"

“I’m good luck for you. You know that. If I’m along with you, you’ll be safer.”

Vickers shook his head, frustrated. “Or that I’m going to have to divide my attention between looking after you and him.”

“This is non-negotiable, Vic. It’s either me or it’s everyone.”

“We’ll go in a taxi. I don’t want any fanfare—understood?”

“Understood, Superintendent—sorry, I should get used to calling you Deputy Commissioner.”

“*Acting* Deputy Commissioner. I haven’t decided yet if I want the job. I won’t make any commitments until Van Der Hul is sorted out.”



CHAPTER FORTY SIX

St Patrick's church had been packed to capacity for the recital. Now, just a few minutes after ten pm, people were streaming away from the church, a solid grey stone building that had survived Japanese air raids and cyclones down through the years.

The cab pulled up outside the church door. Vickers and Julia stepped out and hurried up the church path, weaving their way between departing concert-goers.

Inside, the church was all but empty of people but for Darwin Symphony Orchestra musicians at the front, packing up their instruments and music stands.

A tall, blonde man in his thirties walked towards Vickers and Julia as they approached the altar, smiling. "Hello, I am Kurt Petzl," he said. "You are wanting an autograph?"

"Actually, we were looking for Father Laughton," Julia said.

Petzl looked disappointed. "Oh, I believe he has retired to his residence adjoining the church, on the advice of the police."

They thanked him and exited through a side door, back out into the night. The Catholic presbytery stood beside and a little behind

the church, the surrounding dry lawns dotted with palm trees. Lights were glowing from presbytery windows as Vickers and Julia approached.

"Just a minute, there!" came a voice to their left when they were close to the front door.

Vickers and Julia stopped and turned. A uniformed young cop wandered up to them. He had a single chevron on his green epaulette, a peaked cap on his head, and a holstered revolver on his right hip. He broke into a smile. "Superintendent!" He stretched out his hand.

"Warren!" Vickers responded with surprise, shaking the young constable's hand. "What are you doing here? The last I heard, you were on Groote Eylandt. Still doing the triathlons? You nearly won the Darwin Tri two years ago, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. I still train five days a week but with two kids now, it's getting harder to find the time. Thanks for remembering! I'm one of Father Laughton's watchdogs. A bit of a waste of time, if you ask me."

"Why do you say that, Warren?"

"Well, the killer's long gone, isn't he? I mean, he'd be mad to try anything now. He'd blow his cover. I reckon he's way out the country. They only put two of us on to look after Father Laughton, but it's a waste of public money. Still, a nice quiet night for us. By the way, how come you're here, sir? I thought you'd be taking a bit of time off, since you cracked the case."

"I don't think the case is quiet cracked yet, Warren. I'm not so sure the killer's done. This Van Der Hul is an Albinoni fan. It's too much of a coincidence that Father Laughton is hosting this concert *and* he's a haemophiliac."

"No disrespect, sir, but he couldn't get to Father Laughton now. There are just too many people. No one's that stupid."

"Warren, I know it sounds unlikely, but call it a hunch. I think he's going to make a play tonight. This murderer uses unusual situations to his advantage. He's cunning as a shithouse rat and is very, very resourceful. Look what he did up at Brinkley Point. There

were six cops there and he basically rendered them irrelevant. No one thought he'd have a go there, but he did, and he used the situation to his advantage." Vickers paused, looking around, watching the night. "Besides, even if he isn't here, I bet he's not far away. Something's going to happen. By the way, let me introduce you to Dr Julia Delaney. Dr Delaney is the pathologist who started off the investigation. Without her, nothing would have happened. In fact it was Dr Delaney who pointed out that Father Laughton was hosting tonight's recital. She has been the most valuable member of this hunt. We all owe her a great debt of gratitude."

Julia blushed profusely. It wasn't common for her to receive such praise from tough cops in this man's world. Often, when she came up with good ideas, some – usually male – wannabe would steal her thunder and take the credit. Not so with Vickers. He apportioned praise and blame firmly where it belonged, irrespective of gender, race or social status.

"How do you do, Dr Delaney. I read about you in yesterday's paper. It's an honour to meet you. Mr Vickers is special, isn't he?"

"He certainly is, Warren. Very nice to meet you too. For what it's worth, I agree with Mr Vickers' assessment. Van Der Hul's not finished. He played Albinoni music at all of the murder scenes. This is an opportunity he couldn't turn down. He's a creature of habit. It's the chink in his armour that we've been looking for. Dr Kaylien, the FBI psychological profiler, said such a character can't leave a job unfinished, no matter what – even if he places himself in danger. It's in his DNA – he's got to keep proving himself as better than everyone else. To do otherwise would be to admit to weakness and inadequacy. He'll be here, I'm sure of it."

"If that's the case, shouldn't I call for reinforcements, sir? Guarantee Father Laughton's safety for sure?"

Vickers was the picture of focused resolve. "Absolutely not, Warren. Van Der Hul uses crowds to create confusion. If he is coming here tonight, the fewer police, the better."

“Well, sir, if you’re concerned about Father Laughton, that’s good enough for me. What’s the plan?”

“Okay, Warren, tell me everything that’s happened from the time you got here.”

“Father Laughton came back from the recital immediately after it had ended and was escorted by Constable Alan Turnbull. Turnbull stationed himself inside the house and locked all doors and windows. Because of what happened in Brinkley, I’m supposed to walk round the perimeter of the presbytery every three minutes, then I call in every four minutes. If they don’t get a call from me, they’re going to despatch someone straight away.”

“And how do know the father is okay now, as we speak?”

“There he is now,” said the constable, pointing.

They turned and followed his pointing finger. Through the window of a presbytery front room, they could see a bald man in his thirties walking towards a desk. A uniformed police officer quickly appeared too, hurrying to the window. Seeing them standing outside, he gave them a nod, then pulled the curtains.

“See,” said Warren, “He’s as right as rain.”

Within half an hour, all the lights but one in the presbytery had gone out. The exception was a light in the long hallway that ran the full length of the house. The officer sat on a chair at the far end of the hall, outside the door to Father Laughton’s bedroom. The priest had gone to bed for the night.

Vickers and Julia filled the time sometimes watching from a distance, sometimes by strolling around the house and church side by side, passing Warren on his patrol, looking into dark corners that could be potential hiding places, checking external doors and windows on the presbytery to make sure they hadn’t been tampered with. Each time they went round the house, they’d glance in through the clear glass strips in the front door to see Constable Turnbull sitting at his post reading a paperback book—a murder mystery, as it happened.

Both had an uneasy feeling about this location, this potential victim, and this particular night. Father Laughton would have made an ideal target from the outset of the Darwin murders—being an unmarried priest, he lived alone, and his housekeeper only came in for several hours a day. Laughton had only been spared a visit from Wolf Kroeger because until now he had been out of town, touring interstate with Kurt Petzl and the symphony.

Just after 11:15, Vickers and Julia walked by the front of the house for the umpteenth time. “Just a minute,” said Vickers. “The constable inside is missing.” They hurried to the door and peered in through the glass slits. The chair that had previously been occupied by Turnbull was now vacant. The paperback he had been reading lay on the bare polished wood floor beside the chair, open, its covers facing up.

“He may have just gone to the bathroom.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Vickers returned. He reached up to the brass lion’s head door knocker and rapped it loudly.

“You’ll wake the priest,” Julia objected.

“So be it,” he answered. “Better safe than sorry.” He rapped again, louder and longer this time, but neither the cop nor the priest made an appearance. “I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all.”

“But, how could anyone have gotten into the house?”

Vickers ignored her question. He turned as Warren came running. “What’s up?” the constable asked anxiously. “I heard you bashing on the door.”

“Your mate’s gone missing.”

Warren took a look in through the door. “Probably just taking a leak, sir.”

Vickers shook his head. “I’ve been knocking loud enough to wake the dead, and he hasn’t appeared. And why hasn’t the priest come to the door?”

“I still say,” said Julia, “how could the killer have got into the house?”

“Warren, you did check out the presbytery before the priest came back from the recital, didn’t you? You did clear every room before your mate locked them in?”

Warren suddenly looked guilty. “We did have a look, sir, wardrobes and under the bed, that sort of thing.”

Vickers scowled. “What do you mean by ‘that sort of thing’? Did you or didn’t you search the house fully before you let the priest go in there? Did you check cupboards and the freezer?” Vickers demanded urgently.

“The freezer? Why would we check the freezer?”

“Because that’s where the killer hid out at Brinkley Point. In the fucking freezer.” Vickers punched the door, not even noticing the pain. “He’s in there! How could I have been so stupid? He’s been in there all the time—probably picked a lock while the recital was on. And your mate locked himself and the priest in there with the murderer.”

Warren had gone white. “Shit!”

“Let’s get in there! Got a key?”

“To the house?” asked Warren. “No.”

“Then break in—use your night stick,” Vickers ordered.

Warren slipped the baton from his belt. “Jesus, what if it’s only a false alarm?”

“Break the fucking glass!” Vickers thundered.

Using the end of his baton, Warren shattered the glass in one of the door panels then reached in and unlocked the door.

“Julia, you go call an ambulance and get help.”

“Screw that! In case you’ve forgotten, I’m a doctor. I’ll be needed in there.”

“Keep well back and out of harm’s way.”

“Get on with it!” she urged.

Vickers drew the .44 magnum from his belt, where it had been concealed under his jacket. “Ready?” he said to Warren.

Warren removed his .38 special from its holster. He nodded. "Ready."

"Let's do it, Warren. Watch my back." Vickers grabbed the door handle, turned it, then pushed the door all the way open.

They charged, Vickers leading, Warren on his heels. He could have gone rushing straight to the priest's bedroom, but Vickers was a much better cop than that. Methodically he cleared each room all the way down the hallway, starting with the study at front left. In through the door, lights on, check every nook and cranny to make sure no one was hiding there, before moving on.

Then down the hall, to the front sitting room. Clear. Further the hall, to the dining room. Clear. Across the hall, to a guest room. Clear.

The second-last door on the left was the kitchen. The door was partly ajar, and the room was in darkness. Vickers changed the magnum from right hand to left, reached in through the doorway, and felt the bare brick wall until he found a pair of old brass switches. He turned on the lights, then returned the magnum to his right hand. With his right foot, he kicked the door all the way open. Then, in a crouch, he went into the room.

The kitchen was a large square room with an oak table and chairs dominating the centre of the flagstone floor. Vickers saw two feet protruding around the far right corner of the table. "Somebody here!" he called.

He quickly skirted around to the right, training his weapon in the direction of the feet. As he came around the table, he found Constable Turnbull lying on the floor. His hands were manacled behind his back with his own handcuffs and his ankles were circled with grey tape. The same grey tape covered his mouth. His eyes were open and had a dazed look in them. His revolver was still in its holster. Thin leads trailed away across the floor to a Taser handset lying on the flagstones.

"Jesus!" exclaimed Warren at the sight of his comrade.

"Julia, this one's for you."

Julia hurried in and knelt beside Turnbull. She felt his neck. "He'll be fine—pupils reacting well and there's a strong pulse."

Warren looked like a man possessed. "The bastard's got Father Laughton. I'll kill him!"

"Warren, clear the rooms first."

"I'll kill him, I'll kill him!" Warren screamed, ignoring Vickers and racing out the door in a blind rage.

"Warren!" Vickers yelled. "Wait!"

Warren ran across the hall, lashed out with his right boot, and kicked the old oak door to the main bedroom. It sprang open. He took a step forward and reached in for the light switch. From within the darkened room there came a loud *crack* and Warren's knees buckled. His revolver tumbled from his grasp. He fell back into the hallway and collapsed on the wooden floor, paralysed by the 50,000 volts that had flashed through his body.

Vickers was on the move, out the kitchen door and into the hallway. He glanced down at the twitching Warren, but kept going. Reaching the open doorway to the bedroom, he stretched up for the light switch, flicked it on, then dived to the right of the doorway.

No Taser or dart fired at him. He picked himself up. Seeing Julia in the kitchen doorway, he waved her back, then, crouching low, hurled himself in through the open bedroom doorway.

Directly ahead there was a small roll top desk. Casting his gaze around to the right, he saw a single bed under the window. Father Laughton was lying full-length on the bed. The priest's ankles, wrists, and mouth were all taped. A clear plastic tube ran all the way from his neck to a plastic bottle on the floor. The tube was red, carrying the warm blood that was coursing from the victim's body. The bottle on the floor was a little more than half full with blood. A small vacuum pump attached to the bottle was humming quietly, and there was a black medical bag to one side. Aside from Laughton, the room was apparently empty, but Vickers knew that Van Der Hul had to be either in the wardrobe on the right wall, or behind the door. Gun raised, he began to swing to his extreme right.

As he did, Wolf Kroeger launched himself from behind the door. This was to be the last job. Paris had sent word—the project was compromised; get out of Darwin; a new source of supply would be arranged; production was being switched from Calcutta to Philadelphia. One last job, one last cop to deal with. No big deal...

Now the South African crashed down a hand in a karate chop that almost broke Vickers's right wrist. With an involuntary howl of pain, Vickers loosened his grip on the .44. The revolver fell from his hand and clattered to the floor.

"Frank!" Julia screamed from the hallway.

Vickers had no time to respond. Despite the excruciating pain in his right wrist, he came around with his left fist clenched, swinging a surprise left hook at Kroeger, who was drawing back his right hand for a jab at Vickers's throat.

The left hook connected with the right side of Kroeger's jaw. Momentarily, the South African's vision went blank and his legs lost their ability to support him. He reeled back against the wall, then slid down into a sitting position, looking dazed.

"Get an ambulance, Julia!" Vickers gasped, trying to catch his breath. "Laughton needs an urgent blood transfusion."

"No need." She went straight to the bed and knelt down beside it. Realising the purpose of the vacuum pump, she turned it off. Then she picked up the plastic bottle that contained more than two pints of Father Laughton's life blood and, getting to her feet, raised it as far as the IV tube would allow. Gravity sent Father Laughton's blood flowing back down the tube and into his veins.

Vickers bent to pick up his revolver.

"Look out!" Julia cried, but the warning came too late. Kroeger was suddenly alert. His right foot lashed out, forward then sideways, kicking Vickers's left leg from under him. Vickers tumbled and hit the floor.

Kroeger was on his feet in an instant, his face still, concentration apparent. He went to kick Vickers in the head, but Vickers was ready for the blow; he grabbed the foot as it came at him, and twisted hard.

If he was to prevent his ankle being broken, the South African had no choice but to go with it. Then Vickers pushed his unbalanced opponent's foot away with all his might.

Kroeger went crashing into the open door. But almost immediately he was swinging back around to continue the battle.

Vickers flicked a glance at his revolver, lying on the floor behind him. He was tempted to reach for it, but if he did, he would have to turn his back on his opponent and make himself vulnerable. He chose to come to his feet.

As he straightened up, Kroeger suddenly charged at him, head down. He crashed into Vickers' midriff, grabbing hold of his lapels. The force of his charge drove them both across the room in the direction of the window and onto the bed. Vickers was forced back, landing on the head of the priest. Blood container still in her hand, Julia jumped aside with a shriek. Vickers' fountain pen flew out of his pocket and across the floor, the cap coming off as the pen rolled to a stop.

Vickers' hands were free. He locked them together, then crashed them down on the back of Kroeger's neck. Then he heaved him off, bringing his knee up under his chin as the South African's head came up.

Kroeger reeled back, but he never let go of his grip on Vickers' lapels. He dragged Vickers with him, wheeling him around so his back was to the door. Then he pulled Vickers towards him and crashed his forehead into the bridge of Vickers' nose. Vickers went down like a stone, his head spinning and his nose spurting blood.

Panting, his bottom lip cut and bleeding, Kroeger stood over the fallen Vickers, his back to Julia, contemplating the nature of the *coup de grâce* he would deliver to Vickers.

Julia knew she couldn't just stand there and do nothing. As a student doctor at Harvard, she had been given a valuable lesson by a seasoned, no-nonsense head nurse when she was on duty in the ER late one night. Jenny had two ways of dealing with people who gave her trouble: Either "kick 'em in the balls", or, if you couldn't get into position for that, "give 'em the clap". With Kroeger now standing with his back to Julia, she also chose to go with the latter option.

Dropping the bottle of blood onto the bed beside Father Laughton, Julia rushed at Kroeger, her right hand raised. Coming up behind him, she clapped the flat of her hand against his right ear with all her strength. At the very least, a blow like that would cause sudden and great pain. Often, the air pressure wave it created would be enough to burst an eardrum.

Kroeger let out a cry of pained surprise. Instinctively he rammed his right elbow into the assailant behind him. The blow caught Julia in the throat and sent her stumbling back against the bed, gasping for breath.

With his opponent distracted, Vickers saw his chance. He reached up to the desk beside him for leverage and pulled himself to his feet. His hand came to rest on his gold fountain pen. He grabbed it up and, raising it like a dagger, he fell on Kroeger.

The South African raised his left hand to fend off the blow. The large platinum and gold nib plunged into the flesh of his palm. Vickers withdrew the pen, and blood began to flow.

Again Vickers struck, avoiding the defensive parry this time. The splayed end of the fountain pen nib plunged into Kroeger's right eye.



Kroeger screamed with pain, spinning away, the pen jutting from his eye. He clutched at the barrel of the pen and pull it out, bellowing in agony.

Vickers followed after his wounded opponent, grabbed his head, and crashed it down onto his knee with a sickening crunch. Kroeger sagged to the floor, unconscious.

Julia picked herself up and ran to Vickers. "Are you okay?" she asked, inspecting his bloodied face. She was shaking like a leaf.

He pulled her head to his chest and held her until her shaking stopped. "Of course I'm not okay," he answered matter-of-factly, sniffing back blood, and annoyed for having let himself be injured. "My nose is broken. But I'll live. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she replied. Then she remembered the priest. "Laughton!" she exclaimed. She pulled away from Vickers and hurried back to the bedside. There, she lifted the bottle of blood into the air once more. She looked at Vickers. "You can call the ambulance now."

"Not before I've trussed up our friend here," he returned, nodding towards Kroeger. He bent and picked up his revolver, jamming it in his belt, then crossed the room to the black medical bag that stood open. "As I'd expected," he said, reaching in and taking out a roll of grey packaging tape. He turned to Kroeger, tape in hand, appreciating the delicious irony of the fact the killer was going to be secured with his own tape—the same tape with which he had bound his victims.

Out in the hallway, groaning, Warren was coming round.

Vickers opened the bedroom door just as Warren was sitting up. "You okay, Warren?"

Warren took in the sight of Vickers, blood streaming from his nose down onto the front of his shirt, bending over a figure on the floor. "What the hell happened to you, sir?" he asked.

"Get yourself in here," Vickers commanded. "I want your handcuffs."



EPILOGUE

The newly appointed Deputy Commissioner Frank Vickers sat at his desk. It had been four days since he took Kroeger down. Kroeger was now in hospital, handcuffed and legcuffed to his stretcher, the keyholes blocked off with epoxy resin to prevent any possibility of the lock being picked.

The doctors had objected virulently: “How do you expect us to treat someone shackled this way? It’s not necessary. We’re keeping him sedated, and he’s just had emergency surgery on his eye.” (A brutal attack by typical fascist police, as one left-leaning nurse had explained to her colleagues repeatedly.)

Vickers had been out of hospital for two days, where he’d been kept for observation. He’d been treated for a mild concussion and had his broken nose splinted. He looked like a raccoon, huge bruises under both eyes, cuts to his face, and sporting a swollen upper lip—not the typical appearance of a deputy police commissioner.

He wanted to make a difference to policing in the Northern Territory, and in his new role, this was what he’d set his mind to do. Nonetheless, Vickers was not the kind of man who liked sitting in an office, so he’d set himself a gruelling schedule of touring as many of the police stations as he could, to improve morale and try to institute

new procedures. Ward was still his assistant and had made all the travel arrangements for the Vickers Police Road Show.

Now, Ward entered the large office without knocking, looking obviously worried. "Sir, there's an American who called your mobile—claims he was an executive for Amroc and has information regarding the vampire murders."

"Christ alive, Ward. We're supposed to be setting off at the crack of dawn tomorrow. Sure he's not a crank? Anyway, how the hell did he get my number? It's a silent line."

"No idea, sir, but he sounds like the real deal. He said he's got information about other murders that have taken place in India, Scotland, the USA, and Nigeria. He says they're still going on."

"Wardy, that's a job for Interpol now. We've broken the Aussie operation. No idea why he'd need to speak to me, but, okay, pass me the phone." Ward handed the phone over. "Frank Vickers, Deputy Commissioner. Who am I speaking to?"

"Deputy Commissioner, my name's Martin Margolis. I can't tell you where I'm ringing from—there are people after me. Just believe me when I say that I can help you, and you can help me save a lot of innocent people."

"How do I know you're not a reporter or a lunatic, Mr Margolis?"

"Call Amroc headquarters and ask to be put through to me—they'll tell you I'm incommunicado. Ask me any question you like about Amroc. Ask me my private phone numbers, my credit card details, anything you like. You can also switch your phone to video conference and see me. There are pictures of me on the Amroc website. Martin Margolis, Director of the Amroc Foundation in India. I've got some surprising news for you."

"Go on, Mr Margolis. I'm intrigued."

"The man you arrested for the murders in the Northern Territory is called Wolf Kroeger. He's an ex-South African Parabat. Works for a company in Paris called Tactical Solutions Worldwide, a high-priced

mercenary organisation. He escaped from the hospital facility about half an hour ago. Garrotted and killed two hospital staff.”



“Now I know you’re crazy. I stabbed him in the eye with a pen. He’s on a drip at the hospital shackled to his stretcher.”

“Nevertheless, he’s escaped. I doubt he’s going to do any more blood extractions, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he came after you. He’s a nasty piece of work, and he has a long, long memory.”

“Scum like him don’t scare me.

Let him come. Next time it won’t be my fountain pen that finds itself inside him.”

“Mr Vickers, I think we should meet, and I think you should get anyone you care about to a safe location. As you’ve already seen, police can’t protect against the likes of Wolf Kroeger.”

“Okay, say I buy what you’re selling. Where would you want to meet?”

“I’ll be coming in to Sydney Airport tomorrow morning under an assumed name. I’ll meet you in the arrivals hall at ten am.”

“And I suppose you want me to come alone?”

“No, you can bring the whole Australian Police Force for all I care, but the fewer people who know I’m here, the safer you and I will be. I’ll text you the assumed name I’ll be using some time within the next twenty-four hours. Ten am, Mr Vickers. There are many lives at stake.” Margolis hung up.

“Wardy, cancel the road trip—tell them all it’s postponed indefinitely. Book two tickets to Sydney. I need to get there by this evening. By the way, you’re coming with me. Make the usual arrangements for firearms accompaniment. And check out Martin Margolis on the Amroc website. He’s coming in on a flight tomorrow

and will be in the arrivals hall at ten am. Alert customs to check his photo and detain him when he gets to passport control. Sounds like the fun's far from over. And get me Dr Delaney. I've got some news for her."

Vickers was not to know, but Margolis had placed the call from outside the Sydney Opera house. He'd already been in Australia for two days, heavily disguised and under the name Geoffrey Preston. No way was he going to let the police grab him when he went through customs.

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IAN RIVLIN was brought up in Yorkshire. Originally an electrical engineer, specializing in miniaturized surveillance equipment, he subsequently switched professions and qualified as a doctor, at Sheffield - also in the north of England.

Ian emigrated to Australia with his wife, Penny and two sons. He lives in Queensland and is still practising as a doctor and aviation medical examiner.

He is a keen photographer, firearms shooter and motor racing enthusiast. His interests also include literature, cinema and flying.

His major literary influences have been Michael Crichton, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and John Le Carre.)

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THE TRUTH IS IN THE BLOOD.

When a small mining town in Australia's Northern Territory is rocked by a gruesome murder, American expat Dr. Julia Delaney is tasked with performing the autopsy. Surprisingly her results show that the victim was exsanguinated, drained of blood which is inconsistent with "robbery gone wrong" theory favoured by the local police. After finding her autopsy report has been altered Julia begins to suspect that the murder is part of something much larger. With the help of lead investigator, tough as nails cop Frank Vickers, she begins to dig deeper discovering that this may well not be the killer's first murder and more importantly may not be his last.

In a journey that takes them from dusty roads of the Territory to the bustling streets of Sydney, Julia and Frank find themselves at odds with not only the killer but some very powerful people as they race to stop the killer before he strikes again.

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